

07/14/21 Wednesday

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An Iron Dome Rocket Tried to Shoot Down an IAF Fighter Jet During Israel's May Gaza War, Report Says
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the aftermath of the 11-day war in May, the US rushed to resupply Israel's stocks of the Tamir rockets used by its Iron Dome system, and in its defense appropriations for fiscal year 2022, Congress has set aside \$108 million to help Israel buy more Iron Dome equipment. Israel's Iron Dome air defense systems are supposed to defend the country against rockets and mortar fire, but during the intense bombing campaign of May 2021, one of the rockets accidentally went after an Israeli fighter jet flying over the Gaza Strip, according to reports by Israeli news outlets.

According to the [Times of Israel](#), there are two accounts of the event circulating in Israeli media: in one version, the Iron Dome deliberately locked onto the Israeli Air Force F-15 Ra'am flying over Gaza and fired on it, believing it to be a rocket fired by Hamas and bound for an Israeli settlement. In another version, the missile missed its initial target and then went after the F-15. Either way, the Iron Dome battery operators realized their mistake and detonated the Tamir just moments before it slammed into the Israeli jet, close enough to shower it with shrapnel. Regardless of which is true, the IAF has confirmed the basics of the story and said it was looking to learn from it.

"This is a complex incident, in which the Air Force is required to intercept rockets and at the same time attack Gaza," the IDF told Channel 12. "We are investigating the incident to make improvements, as well as continuing to carry out missions for the sake of the safety of those in Israel."

The IDF made no comment about how the F-15 got targeted, since aircraft are supposed to use friend-or-foe indicators that prevent that kind of friendly fire from happening.

The Iron Dome did manage to shoot down an Israeli aircraft during the 11-day war: a Skylark hand-launched reconnaissance drone met its end in a bit of friendly fire, the [IDF told Haaretz](#). Rocket is launched from a new Israeli anti-missile system known as Iron Dome. (File)

The Tamir missile fired at the F-15 uses a proximity fuse to detonate its 35-pound warhead when it gets close to its target. It's unclear how much damage it could have done to the F-15, but where it struck would have been of great importance. The Skylark drone it shot down weighs just 15 pounds and Hamas' Qassam rockets aren't much bigger, whereas an F-15 weighs an estimated 45,000 pounds.

The jets can take quite a beating, too, as the IAF well knows. In one [incident during a training mission](#) in 1983, an F-15 collided with an A-4 Skyhawk over the Negev, shearing the F-15's starboard wing almost completely off. Nonetheless, the pilot returned to base and made an emergency landing, albeit at twice the typical speed in order to maintain lift, and the jet was later repaired and flew again.

Israel fired thousands of Tamir rockets during the 11-day war in Gaza, which lasted from May 10 to May 21. Airstrikes began after Hamas, which governs the Gaza Strip, fired rockets at Jerusalem in solidarity with Palestinian protesters there, who were demonstrating against Israeli police [actions at Al-Aqsa](#) Mosque and in the several Palestinian-majority neighborhoods where Jewish settlers are trying to evict Palestinian families. Israel responded with airstrikes on Hamas positions, and Hamas responded with more rockets, targeting other Israeli cities, as well. The vast majority of the rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome, but hundreds still got through, and 13 people were killed in Israel. In Gaza, which has no air defenses to speak of, [Israeli aircraft bombed](#) with near-impunity, and more than 250 people were killed.

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\$706 Billion Pentagon Funding Bill Advanced by House Committee Would Close Gitmo, End 2001 AUMF

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The second of two major defense budget bills has been okayed by the House Appropriations Committee, providing \$706 billion in funds for the Pentagon for fiscal year 2022. The bill includes plans for closing the Guantanamo Bay prison and ending the 2001 and 2002 authorizations for use of military force (AUMF).

The House committee [approved the bill](#) on a party-line vote of 33-23, overriding the objections by Republicans that the bill's 1.4% increase was too small. However, Democrats said they disapproved of the large spending bill and only advanced it to submit it to a wider debate in the full House chamber.

"We just spend too much on what is defined as traditional defense, and many of us in the country and many of us in Congress would like to redefine defense," said Rep. Mark Pocan (D-WI), according to [The Hill](#). "What's actually in the defense of this country? It's not in defense contractors, but it's things like pandemics and climate change and other items."

The appropriations bill is one of two bills that comprise the National Defense Authorization Act, with the other being the authorization bill, which sets the spending priorities. The NDAA is expected to be [heard by the committee](#) on July 21.

The bill includes several important amendments added by the committee, including two ending the 2001 and 2002 AUMFs, which Congress created to authorize both the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as military operations in [undeclared war zones](#) if they were against al-Qaeda or forces aligned with the terrorist group, such as the Somali group al-Shabaab.

Last month, the House also [voted to repeal](#) the 2002 and 1991 AUMFs - although US President Joe Biden proved he could [still order airstrikes](#) in Syria and Iraq without them just days later by claiming self-defense instead.

The bill also says its funds cannot be used to operate the Guantanamo Bay detention center after September 30, 2022, or to "support or facilitate offensive military operations conducted by the Saudi-led coalition against the Houthis in the war in Yemen."

Interestingly, it also requires the secretaries of Defense and State to furnish Salvadoran authorities with “all relevant information and documents” relating to the 1981 El Mozote Massacre, in which nearly 1,000 villagers were murdered, half of them children, by the US-trained Atlacatl Battalion. Last year, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele [blocked the probe](#) from going forward, claiming the country’s records had been destroyed, but hearings [related to charges](#) against 17 Salvadoran military officers moved ahead this past May, which might go to trial later this year.

It would also provide Israel with \$150 million to buy new Iron Dome air defense systems, which it uses to intercept rockets fired from Gaza and Lebanon. Israel fired [thousands of interceptors](#) during the 11-day war with Gaza in May, and many rockets escaped their defenses and struck Israeli towns, killing at least 13 people. The money is just part of \$500 million being funneled to Israel for missile defense programs, including the Arrow missile system.

In terms of new construction, the bill provides for eight new [US Navy warships](#), including two Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, a Constellation-class frigate, a Columbia-class ballistic missile submarine, two Virginia-class attack submarines, and more funds for the programs associated with the Ford-class carriers and Zumwalt-class destroyers. It also provides for 85 F-35 Joint Strike Fighters and 12 more F/A-18E/F Super Hornet fighters.

The bill strikes the hotly debated nuclear-armed sea-launched cruise missile, but still includes other [nuclear weapons programs](#), such as \$2.5 billion for the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD), which will replace the Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile, and \$581 million for the Long Range Standoff Weapon (LRSO) [nuclear-tipped cruise](#) missile.

The bill provides for an active-duty troop strength of 1.34 million soldiers, a decrease of 1,975 from last year, and a 2.7% pay increase for them as well as reserves.

The bill closely follows another large Pentagon bill, the 2022 Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies [\(MilCon-VA\) bill](#), which the committee advanced on June 30. That bill provides \$279 billion toward veterans healthcare and related facilities, as well as construction of new base facilities and closure of old ones.

The US spends significantly more than any other nation on its military. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the US [accounted for 39%](#) of the world’s total military expenditure in 2020, having increased for the third year in a row.

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China Urges Taliban to Renounce Terrorism, Says Afghanistan Needs ‘Stable, Healthy’ Muslim Policies

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

As the US’ final exit from Afghanistan nears, Central Asian nations are looking to help the country stabilize - but on different terms than the US’ 20-year occupation. China’s foreign minister cautioned that without fair governance, Afghanistan stands little chance of joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization - something it badly wants.

"As a major source of military power, the Taliban* should realise its responsibilities for the country and the nation, and resolutely cut off all ties with terrorism, to return to the political mainstream of Afghanistan in a manner that is responsible to the country and the people," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Tuesday, according to the [South China Morning Post](#).

He added that China hopes Afghanistan will have "widely inclusive" political power and implement "stable and healthy" Muslim policies while remaining against terrorism.

Wang made his remarks in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe, which shares an 843-mile-long border with Afghanistan and has mobilized more than [20,000 reserve troops](#) to the border amid a renewed Taliban offensive. More than a thousand Afghan soldiers fled across the border into Tajikistan last week, and more recently, [civilian refugees](#) have begun to cross.

Like Tajikistan, China has pledged not to intervene in Afghanistan's internal affairs unless absolutely necessary. However, members of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), a Uyghur separatist group and terrorist organization that seeks independence for China's Xinjiang Autonomous Region, [has long had ties](#) to Afghan terror groups, including the Taliban and al-Qaeda*. In February 2018, the US carried out air [operations against ETIM](#) training sites in Badakhshan, the Afghan province that borders China and Tajikistan, noting the strike would weaken the Taliban, as well.

Zhu Yongbiao, director of the Center for Afghanistan Studies at Lanzhou University, told the [Global Times](#) that "although the Taliban said it won't allow other people or entities to use Afghanistan as a site to attack other countries, this is vague."

"They didn't promise they will help other countries crack down on terrorist groups in the country or hand over the terrorists under their protection," he added.

Wang also attended the meeting of foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Afghanistan Contact Group on Wednesday. Kabul first expressed interest in joining the Eurasian political, economic and security alliance in 2005, and Afghan Deputy Foreign Minister Mirwais Nab told his Tajik counterpart, Khosrow Nazeri, [earlier this week](#) that the SCO would be a "good mechanism" to address the country's security situation.

Afghan Ambassador to China Javid Ahmad Qaem told the Global Times for a Wednesday story that Kabul hopes Beijing will mediate that process with Pakistan.

According to [The Diplomat](#), Afghan President Ashraf Ghani views his government's struggle with the Taliban as a regional issue, hoping that SCO membership will give him leverage on Pakistan, another SCO member, to end its "undeclared war of aggression" it wages by supporting the Taliban.

When the US signed a peace deal with the Taliban in February 2020 that would allow for US forces to exit the country, the Taliban agreed to renounce terrorism and seek reconciliation with Ghani's government in Kabul. However, since the Islamist group sees that government as a US puppet, negotiations have been painfully slow-going, and as the US entered the final phase of its withdrawal in May, the Taliban launched a new offensive, capturing dozens of districts and isolating some of Afghanistan's major cities under Ghani's control.

[Ghani has said](#) he believes the chance the Taliban could come to power again - as it did in 1997, overthrowing the socialist Democratic Republic of Afghanistan with US help - is small, but that an element of danger still exists. However, his [confidence isn't shared](#) by many.

However, even if it does come to power again, the Taliban is likely to pursue some of the same goals as Ghani's government. Taliban spokesperson Suhail Shaheen told the [Global Times](#) last

week that China is a "friend" to Afghanistan, and that he hoped Beijing would be interested in investing in reconstructing the country.

"People from other countries who want to use Afghanistan as a site [to launch attacks] against other countries, we have made a commitment that we will not allow them, whether it's an individual or entity against any country including China," Shaheen said.

The Taliban government that came to power in 1997 was overthrown just four years later by the US invasion launched in response to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda, which planned the attack from its training camps in Afghanistan.

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We're Knot Joking: Finnish Forestry Firm Gets Approval to Launch Tiny Satellite Made of Plywood

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A Finnish company has received approval by the European Space Agency to launch a small cubesat made of wood later this year. The novel design is intended to reduce space debris, but its first mission will simply be to test what happens to wood in the cold vacuum of space. It could become the first wooden object in orbit - it's Woodsat, a test satellite made out of birch-plywood. If successful, it could allow for small satellites that won't contribute to dangerous [space debris](#) or rain [destructive materials](#) back onto Earth.

"The world's first wooden satellite is now certified for a rocket ride and the final pre-launch phase can begin," Finnish forestry firm [UPM announced recently](#). The company is the maker of the WISA plywood brand.

A cube measuring just 10-centimeters wide, Woodsat will test what happens to a specially treated object made out of plywood as it orbits the Earth for months on end, exposed to circumstances no wooden structure has ever experienced before.

"The satellite was subjected to a rigorous vibration test, mimicking a ride to space atop of a rocket shaken by the engines. The satellite also faces hard acoustic noise from the engines accentuated by aerodynamic forces around the fairing," the release stated. WISA Woodsat mission manager Jari Mäkinen noted it fared well, with just two screws loosening during the test. Once in space, Woodsat will be subjected to the withering effects of ultraviolet radiation from the Sun which is unfiltered by the Earth's atmosphere, and will be bombarded by atomic oxygen, a corrosive form of the element split from its breathable O2 form by the Sun's rays. This will blacken Woodsat's outer surface and "eat away at the surface much like a sandblaster beats bricks," Riccardo Rampini, heading ESA's Materials' Physics and Chemistry section, [told Defense One](#).

While Woodsat's plywood has been specially dried to prepare it for space, it will still vent gases like all wood, and that could have unanticipated effects on its systems, which will be busy monitoring the various effects of space on the materials of the satellite.

"The first couple of months will be the most interesting months for the outgassing because this is where you have the highest peak," Rampini added. "If it survives two years, that would be good."

[According to the ESA](#), Woodsat will also carry a selfie stick to record its historic accomplishment - one of the few objects on the satellite not to be made of wood, along with its other sensors. It will also include an amateur radio, allowing folks on Earth to bounce signals off it.

"In the end, Woodsat is simply a beautiful object in terms of traditional Nordic design and simplicity, it should be very interesting to see it in orbit," Jari said. "Our hope is it helps inspire people to take increased interest in satellites and the space sector as something that already touches all our lives, and is only going to get bigger in future."

Woodsat is expected to launch from New Zealand on a reusable Electron rocket before the end of the year.

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CDC: US Recorded More Than 93,000 Overdose Deaths in 2020, Up Nearly 30% Amid Pandemic

by [Evan Craighead](#)

As the US grappled with the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, coronavirus-related restrictions and lockdowns around the country forced many Americans already struggling with addiction into isolation and financial insecurity. Experts have suggested the lack of access to social groups and health care aided the rise in overdose deaths.

Drug overdose deaths in the US surged to a record in 2020, with an estimated 93,331 overdose deaths logged for the 12-month period ending in December 2020, according to [provisional data](#) released on Wednesday by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

At least 92,183 overdose deaths were actually reported.

Comparatively, for the 12-month period ending in December 2019, an estimated 72,151 overdose deaths were recorded.

According to the federal data, almost three-quarters of drug overdose fatalities were attributed to opioids, a class of drugs that includes prescription-strength pain relievers, heroin and synthetic drugs like fentanyl.

Overdose deaths attributed to cocaine and methamphetamine also saw a rise during 2020.

The release of the public health agency's provisional drug overdose death data comes just a day after US President [Joe Biden tapped Dr. Rahul Gupta](#), chief medical and [health officer for March of Dimes](#), to lead the administration's efforts to curb the ongoing addiction and overdose epidemic in the US.

Gupta previously served as Health Commissioner of West Virginia, and led the state's opioid crisis response and public health efforts, including the launch of the Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome Birthscore program, which is used to identify high-risk infants.

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Senate Majority Leader Issues Proposal for Federal Decriminalization of Marijuana
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) previously announced on the unofficial marijuana holiday '4/20' (April 20) that he and other Democratic senators were drafting comprehensive legislation to end the federal prohibition of marijuana and "ensure restorative justice, protect public health and implement responsible taxes and regulations."

On Wednesday, the Senate Majority Leader and Sens. Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) issued a discussion draft of The Cannabis Administration and Opportunity Act, a proposed bill that, in part, seeks to federally decriminalize and reschedule marijuana while also setting forth restorative justice and equity initiatives.

Schumer announced during a same-day news conference that "the waste of human resources because of the overcriminalization [of marijuana] has been one of the great historical wrongs for the last decades.

"As more and more states legalize marijuana, it's time for our federal cannabis law to catch up," said the Senate Majority Leader. "We also very much believe in the expungement of records because of the historical overcriminalization ... Let these people become productive citizens without that criminal record."

As of this article's publication, marijuana has been legalized for medicinal use in 37 US states, and the psychoactive drug has been legalized for recreational use in 18 states and the District of Columbia.

This year alone, Connecticut, New Mexico, New York and Virginia [have moved to legalize marijuana for recreational purposes](#).

According to a [Pew Research Center survey](#) conducted from April 5 to April 11, 70% of US adults aged 18 to 29 years old believe that marijuana should be legalized for both medicinal and recreational use.

The lawmakers highlighted in their [discussion draft](#) that the cannabis industry presently employs 320,000 employees and generates more than \$17.5 billion in sales for 2020, translating to 32% growth from 2019.

"By 2025, it is estimated that the cannabis industry could have nearly \$45.9 billion in annual sales," read the document.

"Cannabis prohibition, a key pillar of the failed War on Drugs, has caused substantial harm to our communities and small businesses, and especially for communities of color," said Wyden, chair of the Senate Finance Committee. "It's as simple as this: Senators Booker, Schumer and I want to bring common sense to the federal government, end prohibition and restore the lives of those hurt most and set them up for opportunity."

Booker emphasized in a quoted statement on Wednesday that the US government's 'War on Drugs' - an initiative launched in the early 70s by then-US President Richard Nixon - "unfairly impacted low-income communities and communities of color."

"While red and blue states across the country continue to legalize marijuana, the federal government continues to lag woefully behind. It is time for Congress to end the federal marijuana prohibition and reinvest in communities most impacted by the failed War on Drugs," Booker added. "I am proud to introduce this landmark piece of legislation with Senator Wyden and Majority Leader Schumer that will finally turn the page on this dark chapter in American history and begin righting these wrongs."

The proposed legislation seeks to establish an "Opportunity Trust Fund" that will derive capital from federal cannabis tax revenue and reinvest the funds into "communities most impacted by the failed War on Drugs."

It also calls attention to the need to help "level the playing field for entrepreneurs of color who continue to face barriers of access to the [cannabis] industry."

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Tennessee DOH Reportedly Nixes All Vaccine Outreach to Teens Amid Conservative Backlash by [Evan Craighead](#)

It was reported earlier this week that Dr. Michelle Fiscus, head of the Tennessee Department of Health's vaccine programs, was terminated from her position .

The Tennessee DOH has moved to halt vaccine outreach programs for all diseases - not just COVID-19 - following fierce pushback from Republican state lawmakers, [according to the Nashville Tennessean](#), citing an internal report and agency emails.

One email, issued on Monday by Tennessee DOH Chief Medical Officer Dr. Tim Jones, told staffers they should carry out "no proactive outreach regarding routine vaccines," such as the vaccines to prevent measles, polio and Hepatitis B. Staffers were also instructed to conduct "no outreach whatsoever regarding the [human papillomavirus] vaccine."

"Any kinds of informational sheets or other materials that we make available for dissemination should have the Tennessee DOH logo removed," Jones wrote, as reported by the outlet.

The state department of health has also halted all COVID-19 vaccine events that were scheduled on public school property. Per an internal report, this directive came from Health Commissioner Dr. Lisa Piercey.

So far, a little over 5,400,000 vaccines have been administered in the state, [according to data](#) from the Tennessee DOH. As of this article's publication, 42.6% of individuals in the state have at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine, while 38.2% of people statewide have been fully vaccinated.

Tennessee's new guidance comes alongside fallout from the firing of Dr. Fiscus, the state's now-former top vaccination official.

"Within days, legislators were contacting [Tennessee DOH] asking questions about the memo with some interpreting it as an attempt to undermine parental authority," Fiscus wrote in a statement issued in response to her firing.

Tennessee State Rep. Scott Cepicky, a Republican, also argued that the DOH was "targeting" minors he described as "impressionable youth" with "reprehensible" advertising in favor of COVID-19 vaccines.

"Specifically, it was MY [sic] job to provide evidence-based education and vaccine access so that Tennesseans could protect themselves against COVID-19," she emphasized. "I have now been terminated for doing exactly that."

The move also prompted the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) to warn that such a move will "only increase the likelihood that we'll see other outbreaks" of diseases other than COVID-19.

Both Fiscus and the AAP argued that her termination is a prime example of how public health is being politicized in the US.

Members of the Tennessee DOH are scheduled to meet in front of lawmakers again on July 21.

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Former US Envoy to Israel Confirms Trump Felt 'Betrayed' After Netanyahu Recognized Biden's 2020 Win

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Excerpts from journalist Michael Wolff's tell-all on the Trump administration previously detailed that former US President Donald Trump felt betrayed by former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu after he congratulated then Democratic rival Joe Biden on winning the 2020 election. Bibi was one of the last world leaders to acknowledge the win.

David Friedman, who once served as the US ambassador to Israel, recently confirmed that former US President Donald Trump was indeed upset when he was informed that former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu offered his congratulations to Joe Biden after being declared the winner of the 2020 presidential election.

The confirmation came during a [Tuesday interview](#) with Talkline Network radio host Zev Brenner that saw Friedman speak on a variety of subjects, including the various difficulties that he encountered while he held the ambassador post.

Speaking to the recent claims made in Michael Wolff's newly-released tell-all, "Landslide: The Final Days of the Trump Presidency," Friedman acknowledged Trump's ever-present frustrations at the time, noting that Netanyahu's congratulations came at a very touchy period at the height of the 2020 election cycle.

"We were at a time which was extremely sensitive," Friedman said, noting that Bibi's recognition of the end of the Trump administration came as the former president repeatedly voiced that the "elections weren't fair."

"I think he would have preferred that the prime minister held his powder a little bit longer," the former ambassador stated.

"My view is that when the United States recognizes a new president, the state of Israel really has no choice but to congratulate the president - that's how democracies work," Friedman continued. "The relationship between Israel and the United States is more important than any

particular individual and whatever the reaction may have been at the time, it's long gone and long disappeared."

Friedman further detailed that while he has not spent as much time with Trump as he had done so in the past, he has kept in touch with the former commander-in-chief, as he has been working on a documentary about the US-brokered Abraham Accords.

Excerpts of Wolff's tell-all began emerging last week, with the [Forward](#) news outlet being among the first to detail how Netanyahu's congratulations to Biden was received as the "[ultimate betrayal](#)" by Trump.

It's worth noting that Netanyahu was one of the last political figures to acknowledge Biden's win, having held off for more than 12 hours after the results were called. However, the former Israeli prime minister did also follow up his statements by thanking Trump for their "friendship."

Despite months passing since the election, Trump has continued to voice unsubstantiated claims that voter fraud prompted his reelection loss.

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Oregon's Bootleg Wildfire Becomes Largest US Blaze After Consuming Over 200,000 Acres by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The 2021 wildfire season is on the verge of setting new, unwanted records after dozens of fires emerged across western portions of the US, where only three blazes have been reported as being contained by officials.

A wildfire churning through Oregon has become the largest fire recorded across the nation after having burned over 200,000 acres of land, data released by the US' National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) has revealed.

[Latest figures](#) indicate that the Bootleg wildfire burning through southern Oregon has ravaged roughly 212,377 acres over a span of eight days. At present, the blaze is only 5% contained, and authorities estimate that it may not be contained until the end of the month.

Officials have determined that the fire is "primarily" showing growth to the east of the greater Gearhart Wilderness area, which is located within the Beaver State's Fremont-Winema National Forest.

An [incident report](#) released by the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center states that the Oregon fire has destroyed some 21 residential buildings and damaged nearly 2,000 others. Approximately 26 emergency crews, 13 helicopters and 139 fire trucks are being used to battle the fire.

There have been no reported fatalities or injuries that were caused by the Bootleg wildfire.

Current [severe weather](#) conditions that have been fueling intense heat waves in the region have only helped to further increase the fire's reach over the last few days. Overnight Wednesday, the Bootleg fire managed to consume approximately 50,000 acres.

Rob Allen, the incident commander for the PNW2 incident management team, remarked in a [statement](#) issued by the interagency group that while firefighting crews have managed to make

"steady progress where winds and terrain allow," their efforts are constantly being held off by worsening conditions.

"For the third day in a row, firefighters had to disengage at times for their safety and weather isn't going to change for the foreseeable future," Allen noted. Air operations have been temporarily pulled back on account of heavy smoke in the area.

The cause of the blaze is still unknown.

Officials have implemented a bevy of road closures and mandatory evacuation alerts in areas along the wildfire's path. However, the Bootleg blaze, which started in Oregon's Klamath County, is only just one of at least 6 active fires churning in the state.

Year-to-date, the [NIFC](#) has recorded over 34,000 fires that burned over 2.2 million acres. At present, the US is being ravaged by 68 active large fires recorded in states of Idaho, Montana, Arizona, California, Alaska, Washington, Wyoming, New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Minnesota.

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Netflix Reportedly Plans to Introduce Video Games

by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several months, rumors have emerged suggesting that the Netflix streaming service would be venturing toward the gaming world in order to revamp the platform, entice potential new subscribers and lay down the groundwork for a potential new revenue stream. Popular streaming service Netflix is shifting gears and heading into the video game sector as the platform seeks to outdo its competitors, newly surfaced reports detailed late Wednesday. Bloomberg [reported](#) that Netflix's jump into the video game world will see the addition of Mike Verdu, a former executive who previously worked with Facebook and Electronic Arts Inc. Verdu, who helped to bolster Facebook's Oculus content, is expected to be taking on the role of vice president of game development, and will be reporting to Greg Peters, who serves as Netflix's chief operating officer.

It's presently unclear what genre of video games Netflix will be providing for its subscribers, or if the streaming platform will be cooking up original content. A timeline for the new project has not yet been detailed.

Netflix previously dabbled in interactive content with the release of "You vs. Wild" and "Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt: Kimmy vs. The Reverend" in 2019 and 2020, respectively. Other interactive releases include 2018's "Black Mirror: Bandersnatch" film.

However, not all of Netflix's interactive efforts were geared to adult viewers. Early on in the company's adventures into such content, many of the interactive piece were geared toward kids. The latest development comes nearly two years after tech giant Apple launched [Apple Arcade](#), a video game subscription service that enforces no limitations on plays and does not require an active internet connection to function.

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'Preying on Fears': California Woman Accused of Selling Fake COVID-19 Immunizations, Vaccine Cards
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The California case comes less than four months after the US' Federal Bureau of Investigations issued an alert about scams involving the sale of falsified vaccination cards, warning that offending individuals would be subjected to applicable laws.

A licensed homeopathic physician was arrested and charged in California on Wednesday for allegedly selling fake COVID-19 immunization treatments and falsifying vaccine cards, marking the first such federal criminal fraud case for prosecutors.

The US Department of Justice has identified the physician as 41-year-old Juli A. Mazi of Napa, California. She is presently charged with one count of wire fraud and one count of false statements related to health care matters.

A [criminal complaint](#) released by the department states that officials were informed of Mazi's alleged scheme in April after a tipster made a call to the hotline of the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General.

The unidentified individual told officials that relatives had allegedly purchased from Mazi COVID-19 homeoprophylaxis immunization pellets and falsified vaccination cards that stated the specified individual had been given the two-dose Moderna vaccine.

It is alleged that the date listed on the cards aligned with the day that the pellets were ingested. The cards also included lot numbers to a specific Moderna vaccine package.

Prosecutors outlined in court documents that Mazi is said to have claimed that consuming pellets containing small amounts of the COVID-19 virus would effectively provide a "lifelong immunity" from the respiratory disease. She is also alleged to have encouraged customers to pass along the pellets to children, including babies.

"This defendant allegedly defrauded and endangered the public by preying on fears and spreading misinformation about FDA-authorized vaccinations, while also peddling fake treatments that put people's lives at risk," Deputy Attorney General Lisa O. Monaco said in a [statement](#) released by the Justice Department. "Even worse, the defendant allegedly created counterfeit COVID-19 vaccination cards and instructed her customers to falsely mark that they had received a vaccine, allowing them to circumvent efforts to contain the spread of the disease."

Additionally, investigators determined that Mazi offered homeoprophylaxis immunizations for childhood illness that she alleged would fulfill immunization requirements for California schools. Falsified immunization cards were later submitted by parents to California schools.

"The investigation revealed that Mazi used the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to expand her pre-existing immunization scheme and capitalize on a national emergency for her own financial gain," the complaint explains.

If convicted, Mazi could face as much as 20 years behind bars on the wire fraud charge and five years on the false statements offense. However, both charges carry a maximum \$250,000 fine and three years of supervised release.

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US Jobless Claims Drop on Week, Back at Pandemic Lows - Labor Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US jobless claims fell by 26,000 to return to pandemic-era lows of 360,000 last week, according to Labor Department data on Thursday that suggested that the fragile labor market recovery amid the COVID-19 was continuing.

"In the week ending July 10, the advance figure for seasonally adjusted initial claims was 360,000, a decrease of 26,000 from the previous week's revised level," the Labor Department said in a statement. "This is the lowest level for initial claims since March 14, 2020 when it was 256,000."

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Blinken, Le Drian Discuss EU-US Efforts to Combat Russia, China - State Department

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US State Secretary Antony Blinken and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian called for joint US-European efforts to stand up to Russia and China, US State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday.

The meeting took place on Wednesday in Washington.

"They agreed on the need for joint U.S.-European efforts to stand up to Russian aggression and to address the People's Republic of China's human rights abuses, coercive trade practices, and aggressive foreign policy. They also reviewed ongoing efforts to return to mutual compliance with the JCPOA," Price said.

The officials also discussed the situation around the recent assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moise, as well as France's troop reconfiguration in the Sahel region of western Africa and the situation in Lebanon.

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US Not Expecting Deal on Nord Stream 2 During Biden-Merkel Talks - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect to reach a deal on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline following the meeting between President Joe Biden and Chancellor Angela Merkel at the White House later on Thursday, a senior Biden administration official said. "I do expect that President Biden will raise his longstanding concerns with Chancellor Merkel during their meeting about Russia's geopolitical project... We are not anticipating any sort of formal announcement or deliverable coming out of the leaders' meetings tomorrow on Nord Stream 2," the official said during a briefing.

The nearly finished Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which will transport natural gas from Russia directly to Germany, has been opposed by Washington yet supported by Berlin. Moscow has repeatedly said the project is purely commercial, not political.

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Biden, Merkel Expected to Discuss Afghanistan, Russia, Cyberattacks - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and German Chancellor Angela Merkel will discuss matters concerning Afghanistan, Russia and cyberattacks, among others, during a meeting at the White House later on Thursday, a senior US administration official said. "I expect they will discuss the full range of shared security challenges, including Afghanistan, Libya, and the Sahel," the official told reporters. "I expect the leaders also will discuss shared ways to respond to regional challenges, including addressing Russian cyberattacks, territorial aggression; countering China's rising influence non-market economic practices and human rights abuses, including forced labor; support for Ukraine sovereignty and territorial integrity and also bolstering the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the western Balkan countries." Moscow has repeatedly denied allegations Russia played a role in recent cyberattacks against US infrastructure and businesses.

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UNICEF Urges S. Africa Authorities to Exercise Restraint, People to Remain Peaceful

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is calling on the residents of South Africa to remain peaceful and the country's authorities to exercise restraint amid the unrest prompted by the jailing of former President Jacob Zuma, UNICEF Chief of Communication and Partnerships in South Africa Toby Fricker told Sputnik.

"UNICEF, as part of the UN in South Africa, urges all South Africans to remain peaceful in the midst of the current pandemic, to respect COVID-19 protocols, and to assist the government in facilitating the on-going vaccination roll out without interruptions," Fricker said. "The UN in South Africa also calls upon all law enforcement agents to exercise restraint and respect their human

rights obligations including making full use of the UN Guidance on Less-Lethal Weapons in Law Enforcement in their operations to maintain peace."

Fricker said the unrest will only exacerbate the existing social and economic hardships in South Africa, including joblessness, poverty and inequality as well the future of the children.

On Friday, protests erupted in South Africa following the news that the authorities have jailed Zuma. The first wave of unrest began in KwaZulu-Natal and have since spilled over to South Africa's economic capital of Johannesburg in Gauteng. The protests turned into riots complete with looting and acts of vandalism. On Monday, the government dispatched troops to quell the unrest.

Zuma, 79, turned himself in on July 7 to begin serving a 15-month sentence he was handed for contempt of court after skipping a corruption trial.

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Violence, Unrest in S. Africa Impacts Coronavirus Vaccination Campaign - UNICEF

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The unrest and violence in South Africa prompted by the authorities jailing former President Jacob Zuma is challenging the coronavirus vaccination campaign in the country, UNICEF Chief of Communication and Partnerships in South Africa Toby Fricker told Sputnik.

"The violence and unrest is having an impact on the COVID-19 vaccination campaign and could further fuel the spread of the virus at a time when South Africa is battling its third wave," Fricker said. "Reports of vaccination sites being forced to close and health clinics being damaged are also particularly concerning, as the COVID-19 vaccination roll-out has been gathering pace and will now be slowed, putting more lives at risk."

Fricker said the difficulties health workers have in accessing medical facilities as well as large number of people now not taking part in the coronavirus prevention measures could further fuel the spread of the virus and impact the safe continuation of child health services.

"According to the Department of Health, some pharmacies and medical centers have been looted and the medical stock has been stolen," he said.

Fricker also said some UNICEF programs have been disrupted by the unrest and its partners' work on the ground has also been directly affected.

"Ongoing COVID-19 community-level prevention messaging, support to vaccine registration and other health services have been temporarily halted in some areas," he said. "Partners in Kwa-Zulu Natal have also reported having to scale down critical child protection social services to some of the most vulnerable children, while there are reports of some schools being damaged in the KwaZulu-Natal area."

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UNICEF 'Deeply Concerned' About Impact of Violence on Children in S. Africa - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has grave concerns about how the ongoing unrest and violence in South Africa is affecting children's safety and well-being, Chief of Communication and Partnerships in South Africa Toby Fricker told Sputnik.

"Children have been caught in the violence and unrest across parts of South Africa and need to be protected," Fricker said. "UNICEF is deeply concerned about the impact of ongoing violence and civil unrest that started last weekend on the safety and well being of children across South Africa."

Fricker also said that UNICEF is saddened about the reported death of a 15-year old boy during the unrest and the horrifying situations the children have found themselves in.

"Shocking images that have been widely shared also show a toddler having to be thrown from a building to be rescued from a fire in Durban," he said. "The last few days of violence also comes at a time when the country is battling a third COVID-19 wave and with schools closed, due to high COVID-19 infection rates, children could be further exposed to the violence."

Fricker emphasized that children must be protected everywhere and at all times.

At least 45 have been killed in unrest in South Africa since former President Jacob Zuma was jailed last week, local media reported on Tuesday, a day after the government mobilized the military to quell the protests and riots. Twenty-six deaths have been reported in Zuma's home province of KwaZulu-Natal.

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RPT - US Pediatric Cardiologists to Resume Operations in Russia in August - Group Leader
WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - A US-based group of international pediatric cardiologists plan to conduct a second trip to Russia in August to operate on children with complex heart issues, organization leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"Our colleagues from the Siberian city of Kemerovo have asked us to be back from August 21 to September 4," said Novick, who leads William Novick Global Cardiac Alliance.

From 2008-2013, Novick's team made 13 trips to Kemerovo where they operated on 152 children and raised the level of surgery to complex neonatal repairs.

"However, in 2019 the surgeon we trained moved to another city, and we were asked to return to help another surgeon achieve a similar level of competency in complex surgery for children. We are happy to help our colleagues in Kemerovo to return to providing surgery at this level," Novick said. "Our plan is to continue the program until our colleagues achieve the level of complex operations they want to reach."

The entire schedule of the upcoming trip is not ready yet, but in general Novick's team operates on 10-15 patients each two-week long trip, including half of them with complicated issues and others with less serious problems.

The group may develop another project in Russia in the near future, Novick said.

"We are always looking to help our colleagues in Russia," Novick said. "I have a new group supporting work in Russia, and they want to talk to me."

Novick and his colleagues have conducted more than 400 surgeries in Russia since 2008. The Novick Cardiac Alliance comprises a group of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in different "hot spots" around the world. Previously, the group has performed surgeries in several Russian cities, including Voronezh and Nizhny Novgorod.

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RPT - Some 10,000 Americans Annually Fall Victim to Guardianship in US - Advocacy Group

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Some 10,000 people in the United States become victims of guardianship annually because the federal government is not giving the issue enough attention, Center for Estate Administration Reform (CEAR) Executive Director Rick Black told Sputnik.

"We estimate that approximately 10,000 new victims occur every year, funneling nearly \$10 billion to the network of people who create them - long-term care facilities, attorneys, professional guardians and others within that network. It's big business," Black said. "So, my fear is if we don't do something about it... organized crime is even more organized, it's going to really take this over. And that is frightening because it's already out of control."

Black noted that CEAR has either counseled or researched some 4,000 cases since they started working on the issue in 2014.

"Approximately \$300 billion are acquired by third parties through the act of a guardianship or conservatorship. So, the estimates are 1.3 million adults," he said. "No one really knows the exact number because the federal government and state governments have decided it's not important to measure. And that's a complete fallacy because we've been identifying since 1986 that this is a problem. But the American Bar Association, the National Guardianship Association and every state bar association, which are very powerful lobbyists, have effectively blocked any ability to introduce reforms that would stop the victimization."

Black explained that the most important thing CEAR educates and advocates for victims of fraudulent adult guardianships and conservatorships and other forms of estate trafficking.

"These are crimes committed by predatory attorneys who have leveraged the dysfunction of the United States' equity court system," he said.

Black pointed out he was personally affected when his father-in-law fell victim upon turning 80 and the family recognized he was vulnerable.

"When we took action to make sure that he was closer to us because he lived in Las Vegas and we were living in Charlotte, North Carolina, which is about 2000 miles apart, he said he was fine and his landlord and female friend of 30 years also said he was fine," Black said. "Then, six months later, we discovered that she had stolen \$220,000 from him and he didn't even know it because he was so impaired with Alzheimer-type dementia. We went to go rescue him. She took him captive."

Black local law enforcement would not engage in the case but recommended that the family calls an attorney and files for guardianship.

"That was the beginning of a nightmare that no American should have to experience, because it was one thing to know she is exploiting my father-in-law and stealing from him. But the whole system is going to protect her at his expense and his daughter's expense - his only child - and our entire family's expense," Black said. "So, when we realized what we were up against and we did some research and saw that they were doing this on a routine basis, we then started researching those cases. And eventually we got the Nevada Attorney General to engage, which yielded ten criminal convictions, ten criminal convictions of attorneys and professional guardians who were using guardianship to cover up a criminal enterprise."

Black noted that he assumed the judicial system was a sanctuary and a court room a place where the law and truth are respected and the public is protected, but found out quite the opposite.

"What I found very quickly is that they have no interest in protecting my father-in-law, my wife or me. They intend to exploit us. And they did. Most Americans, until they've been in one of those courtrooms, they have no idea that that can happen routinely. Sadly, it does," he said.

Black spoke with Sputnik at a rally in Washington, DC held in support of US pop singer Britney Spears who has been in a conservatorship for 13 years and unable to make decisions for herself such as whether to have a child. Black noted that he came to Washington, DC from North Carolina to attend the event after learning about it from social media.

"Today, there's a rally in Los Angeles. There's a rally in New York. There's a rally here in Washington, DC. A lot of the groups are taking advantage of the face and voice that Britney has given the movement. This is long overdue. It has been building really since World War II in the United States," he said.

Black emphasized that the Spears case is no different than thousands of others, noting that she was vulnerable when younger but did not need to be placed in a conservatorship.

"The attorneys want to create as many conservatorships as they can because it's like an annuity. Once you're locked in it, you can't get out," he said. "All they do is keep telling the judge - I need a \$1 million because I did this or a \$100,000 because I did that. The judges will just award the money because it's coming out of Britney's estate."

Black explained that the only thing unique about Britney's is that she was that lucid, vibrant, smart, had lots of money and it went on for 13 years before anyone on the inside said, maybe we don't need to be doing this anymore.

"What we're going to see today and going forward, sadly, is all the gamesmanship as they figure out how to keep this thing going on for as long as they can. My projection is that she'll get freed in a year or so and it'll cost her another \$5-\$6 million. But it's completely wasteful."

Black expressed hope the Spears case will bring about reforms to stop the victimization and that CEAR goes to Washington, DC often to lobby for the changes that are needed at a federal level because the decisions - orders - are all made at the county level and involve some 15,000 judges.

"The variability at the lowest level where these orders are signed is very, very high and without a degree of oversight. That is going to create more victimization, so we're here to lobby. Britney's case is helping to bring that attention to the problem. What we're saying is accountability, zealous counsel, free counsel for these people so that everybody understands what this costs, what the risks are of conservatorship and guardianship. I'm confident now we're going to finally get some help."

In June, 39-year-old Spears addressed a Los Angeles court with a heartfelt request to return her freedom and criticized her family's actions, saying she was traumatized and unhappy under the conservatorship. Spears said she was not allowed to visit her friends, was forced to work long hours against her will and was drugged when she disobeyed.

In 2008, a court granted the petition filed by the pop singer's once-estranged father, James Spears, to assume full control of her life after she experienced a series of meltdowns and two hospitalizations for psychological evaluations.

Britney Spears tried last November to free her from the conservatorship, but the court then again sided with her father. Spears' finances are co-managed by her father and the financial company Bessemer Trust.

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RPT - US Pediatric Cardiac Surgeons May Halt Operations in Libya Due to Lack of Funds - Leader

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"Our program in Libya is in danger because of lack of funding," said Novick, who leads the William Novick Global Cardiac Alliance. "Without a private sponsor or big foundation it is not realistic for us to think about going back."

In June, the group spent four weeks in Libya and conducted 47 surgeries of different levels of complexity. Since February, US doctors have operated on a total of 117 children.

Novick said each trip to Libya costs up to \$200,000 per month, including airline tickets, hotel expenses, supplies, visas, as well as paying full-time staff.

The group currently started discussing details of a possible trip in August with a private sponsor. However, all recent trips with a few minor exceptions were financed by the Libyan authorities, and the doctor expressed concerns over the future of this project.

"I do not think that is going to happen this year because there is a lot of political maneuvering," he said.

Novick noted that many people in Libya regret the situation, including patients' parents, the nation's minister of health, pediatricians and pediatric cardiologists.

"I spoke to one of them recently - she was crying about a child that needs an urgent operation, and she does not know what is going to happen with this child," Novick said.

Previously, Libyan authorities were hoping to include up to 500 children on the operation list annually, he added.

William Novick Global Cardiac Alliance's teams operate on children with heart defects around the world, including underserved communities and hotspots. The group began working in Libya several years ago and has been able to conduct hundreds of surgeries despite instability. The alliance's specialists also train local doctors and nurses to conduct operations independently.

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RPT - COVID-19 Vaccines May Boost Myocarditis Cases, But Overall Effects Mild - US Cardiologist

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The coronavirus vaccines may increase the number of cardiac issues in children, but the response is mild in the vast majority of cases, US surgeon Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"There is an increase in the number of cases of myocarditis in children following the second vaccination dose, but it has been mild in the vast majority of cases," Novick, who leads the William Novick Global Cardiac Alliance team of international pediatric surgeons, said.

The Alliance team conducts surgeries in numerous countries around the world where local doctors are unable to perform on complex cases. The team also provides training to local partners to improve their skills and the ability to operate without assistance.

Novick said myocarditis may or may not have any significant long-term consequences depending on its severity, he added.

"However, if you have a really serious case, then, yes, you can have significant heart issues in the future," he said.

Novick pointed out that the number of cases of myocarditis after administering the coronavirus is small and added that specialists have not had adequate time amid the pandemic to study the long-term consequences.

"It is a sort of emergency, and all of us, everybody who has gotten a vaccine, are in a kind of experiment," Novick said. "So, yes, there are going to be some side effects, but at this point of time it is not of a level that it is going to cause vaccine usage to be halted."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in early July that an elevated risk of myocarditis has been observed among mRNA coronavirus vaccine recipients, particularly males aged 12-29. However, the CDC concluded that the risk of mortality from COVID-19 exceeds the number of expected myocarditis complications.

The World Health Organization said last week that there was a "likely causal association" between coronavirus vaccine using mRNA technology and myocarditis, which had been reported in multiple countries, including the United States.

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US Lawmakers Unveil Plans to Introduce Measure to End Federal Prohibition of Marijuana

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - A group of US Senate Democrats in a statement announced plans to introduce legislation to end the federal prohibition of marijuana.

"Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden and Senator Cory Booker today released a discussion draft of the Cannabis Administration and Opportunity Act, proposed legislation that would help put an end to the unfair targeting and treatment of communities of color by removing cannabis from the federal list of controlled substances and empowering states to implement their own cannabis laws," the release said on Wednesday.

The release pointed out that several US states have already legalized adult and medical use of marijuana.

The proposed legislation would also remove federal non-violent marijuana crimes and allow individuals currently serving time in federal prison for non-violent marijuana crimes to petition a court for re-sentencing, the release said.

US states that have fully legalized marijuana include Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, Wyoming, and the District of Columbia, according to data from DISA Global Solutions.

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US Lawmakers Seek Tax on Imports From Nations With Weak Climate Change Policy - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US lawmakers will push to pass legislation that would impose a tax on imports from countries that lack action to fight climate change, the New York Times reported.

The report said on Wednesday that Democrat lawmakers agreed to include the tax proposal in the \$3.5 trillion budget resolution.

The plan also includes tax breaks for wind, solar and other renewable energy sources, the report said.

The United States, China, India, Russia, Japan, Brazil, Indonesia, Iran, Canada, and the European Union are the world's top emitters of greenhouse gases, the report added.

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"That was the beginning of a nightmare that no American should have to experience, because it was one thing to know she is exploiting my father-in-law and stealing from him. But the whole

system is going to protect her at his expense and his daughter's expense - his only child - and our entire family's expense," Black said. "So, when we realized what we were up against and we did some research and saw that they were doing this on a routine basis, we then started researching those cases. And eventually we got the Nevada Attorney General to engage, which yielded ten criminal convictions, ten criminal convictions of attorneys and professional guardians who were using guardianship to cover up a criminal enterprise."

Black noted that he assumed the judicial system was a sanctuary and a court room a place where the law and truth are respected and the public is protected, but found out quite the opposite.

"What I found very quickly is that they have no interest in protecting my father-in-law, my wife or me. They intend to exploit us. And they did. Most Americans, until they've been in one of those courtrooms, they have no idea that that can happen routinely. Sadly, it does," he said.

Black spoke with Sputnik at a rally in Washington, DC held in support of US pop singer Britney Spears who has been in a conservatorship for 13 years and unable to make decisions for herself such as whether to have a child. Black noted that he came to Washington, DC from North Carolina to attend the event after learning about it from social media.

"Today, there's a rally in Los Angeles. There's a rally in New York. There's a rally here in Washington, DC. A lot of the groups are taking advantage of the face and voice that Britney has given the movement. This is long overdue. It has been building really since World War II in the United States," he said.

Black emphasized that the Spears case is no different than thousands of others, noting that she was vulnerable when younger but did not need to be placed in a conservatorship.

"The attorneys want to create as many conservatorships as they can because it's like an annuity. Once you're locked in it, you can't get out," he said. "All they do is keep telling the judge - I need a \$1 million because I did this or a \$100,000 because I did that. The judges will just award the money because it's coming out of Britney's estate."

Black explained that the only thing unique about Britney's is that she was that lucid, vibrant, smart, had lots of money and it went on for 13 years before anyone on the inside said, maybe we don't need to be doing this anymore.

"What we're going to see today and going forward, sadly, is all the gamesmanship as they figure out how to keep this thing going on for as long as they can. My projection is that she'll get freed in a year or so and it'll cost her another \$5-\$6 million. But it's completely wasteful."

Black expressed hope the Spears case will bring about reforms to stop the victimization and that CEAR goes to Washington, DC often to lobby for the changes that are needed at a federal level because the decisions - orders - are all made at the county level and involve some 15,000 judges.

"The variability at the lowest level where these orders are signed is very, very high and without a degree of oversight. That is going to create more victimization, so we're here to lobby. Britney's case is helping to bring that attention to the problem. What we're saying is accountability, zealous counsel, free counsel for these people so that everybody understands what this costs, what the risks are of conservatorship and guardianship. I'm confident now we're going to finally get some help."

In June, 39-year-old Spears addressed a Los Angeles court with a heartfelt request to return her freedom and criticized her family's actions, saying she was traumatized and unhappy under the

conservatorship. Spears said she was not allowed to visit her friends, was forced to work long hours against her will and was drugged when she disobeyed.

In 2008, a court granted the petition filed by the pop singer's once-estranged father, James Spears, to assume full control of her life after she experienced a series of meltdowns and two hospitalizations for psychological evaluations.

Britney Spears tried last November to free her from the conservatorship, but the court then again sided with her father. Spears' finances are co-managed by her father and the financial company Bessemer Trust.

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US Senator Calls for Suspending Vienna Talks After Iran Plot to Kidnap Journalist

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US Senate Foreign Relations Committee Ranking Member Jim Risch in a statement urged the Biden administration to suspend indirect nuclear negotiations with Tehran in Vienna after Iranian intelligence officials allegedly planned to kidnap an American-based journalist.

"The attempted kidnapping of an American journalist on US soil by Iranian intelligence officials is appalling," Risch said on Wednesday. "I urge the administration to immediately suspend indirect negotiations with Iran in Vienna."

Earlier on Wednesday, the White House and State Department said although the United States condemns Iran's kidnapping plot, there are no plans to discontinue indirect talks with Iran to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The US Justice Department announced on Tuesday that a federal court has charged four Iranian intelligence officials for allegedly participating in a kidnapping conspiracy, violating sanctions, as well as bank and wire fraud.

The Iranians planned to kidnap a New York City journalist of Iranian origin who criticized the Iranian government.

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Kerry, Putin Discuss Goal of Reaching Net-Zero Emissions - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US climate envoy John Kerry in a phone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized that the United States and Moscow have important roles to play in achieving net-zero greenhouse gas emissions, the State Department said in a readout.

"Special Presidential Envoy Kerry emphasized that the United States and Russia have important roles to play, including on reducing greenhouse gas emissions in this critical decade, aiming for net-zero emissions in the long term," the release said on Wednesday.

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US Tests Autonomous Ocean Surface, Underwater Surveillance Technology - Homeland Security

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is evaluating maritime surveillance technology in support of Coast Guard efforts to protect its maritime borders and commercially navigable waterways, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said in a press release. "DHS S&T [Science and Technology] teamed up with the Coast Guard, University of Southern Mississippi (USM), the US Naval Research Laboratory (NRL), the Applied Research Laboratory (ARL) at Penn State, Ocean Aero, Inc., Cherokee Nation Strategic Programs (CNSP), and the Homeland Security Systems Engineering and Development Institute (HSSDI), to develop, acquire, evaluate, and test specialized, environmentally powered (wind and solar), multi-mission capable, unmanned surface and underwater vessels," the release said on Wednesday. The evaluation team initiated acceptance testing of six unmanned vessels at USM's Marine Research Center (MRC) at the Port of Gulfport. They will utilize MRC's specialized lab facilities and waterfront access to evaluate the vessels capabilities in multiple areas, including navigation; surface, diving, and subsurface operations, the release said. The vessels are capable of operating effectively for long periods of time using only wind and solar power. They provide a platform for cameras and advanced sensors to detect relevant anomalies and threats, the release added. The effort aims to support the US Coast Guard's mission of protecting the more than 95,000 miles of maritime border shoreline and 15,000 miles of waterways, seaports, and other commercially navigable waters, according to the release.

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Biden to Meet Ex-Top US General in Afghanistan to Thank Him for His Service - White House

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will meet with the former commander of the US forces in Afghanistan Gen. Scott Miller later on Wednesday to thank him for his service, White House Press spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a statement. Miller was the commander of the US forces in Afghanistan since September 2018, making him the longest serving military commander during the United States' 20 year presence in Afghanistan. "The President will meet with General Miller today to thank the General for his extraordinary service in Afghanistan," Psaki said on Wednesday. "As the final commander of the Resolute Support Mission, General Miller oversaw the vast majority of our drawdown from Afghanistan, which is a particularly vulnerable period for our troops."

Last week, Miller stepped down from his post and transferred authority of American forces in Afghanistan to US Central Command (CENTCOM) head Frank McKenzie.

Earlier this week, CENTCOM said the withdrawal process of US forces from Afghanistan is more than 95 percent complete. The entire retrograde process is expected to be complete by August 31.

The Taliban are increasing their attacks against Afghan government forces as US and NATO forces withdraw from the country. The withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan was one of the points agreed to between the Taliban and the United States in Doha in February of last year.

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PREVIEW - Merkel Meets Biden on Farewell, Fence-Mending US Tour With Nord Stream 2 on Agenda

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden hosts on Thursday German Chancellor Angela Merkel who is on a farewell visit to the White House ahead of her political retirement as both countries work to mend ties after several rocky years under the previous American administration.

The leaders are expected to address multiple often contentious issues - from the global fight against COVID-19 and efforts to ensure the post-pandemic economic rebound to the impending withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan and an ongoing quest for a transatlantic consensus over the Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting route from Russia into Europe.

Merkel, who turns 67 on July 17, retires after Germany's election on September 26 as she chose not to seek her fifth term in office. Merkel is paying her 19th official visit to the US with Biden being the fourth President she will be meeting with over the span of her career. She is also the first European leader to be hosted at the White House since Biden's inauguration, though they both met during last month's G-7 summit in England and NATO summit in Brussels. Merkel may expect a warm welcome as Biden seeks to restore US alliances across the globe and break up with unilateral policies of his predecessor, Donald Trump, who would publicly chastise Germany for failing to pay what he considered a fair due to NATO coffers and was about to pull out at least some of American troops stationed in the country. In arguably the most telling sign of an unprecedented low in the relationship between the two countries Trump refused a handshake when he was greeting Merkel at the White House in 2017.

Biden in contrast publicly praised Merkel as the European leader he admires most.

In his fence-mending bid he went as far as to waive Trump-era sanctions against the German Nord Stream 2 operator and recognized that the construction is unlikely to be stopped. The countries are now engaged in consultations on how to prevent Russia from gaining extra leverage over European energy markets and to offset potential Ukraine losses.

It is not immediately clear if the leaders will be ready to announce a breakthrough during their summit.

Among other issues on the agenda are shared concerns about the future Afghanistan following the withdrawal of US troops set to be completed by August 31. Germany has already pulled out

the remainder of its military force. More than 150,000 German troops served in Afghanistan over the last 20 years and Germany is believed to be the second largest donor of the beleaguered country.

CNBC also quoted unnamed US officials who said that Biden and Merkel are also expected to discuss "an alarming number of cyberattacks."

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Multiple Failures in FBI Probe of Ex-US Gymnastics Team Doctor - Justice Dept. Report

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The FBI Indianapolis field office's investigation into allegations of sexual abuse by former US gymnastics team physician Lawrence Gerard Nassar was marred by multiple failures, the Justice Department Office of Inspector General (OIG) said in a report.

"The OIG found that, despite the extraordinarily serious nature of the allegations and the possibility that Nassar's conduct could be continuing, senior officials in the FBI Indianapolis Field Office failed to respond to the Nassar allegations with the utmost seriousness and urgency that they deserved and required, made numerous and fundamental errors when they did respond to them, and violated multiple FBI policies," the report said on Wednesday.

The FBI did not conduct a formal investigation into the matter until more than eight months after a September 2015 interview with one victim. This interview was itself preceded by a meeting in July with the US Gymnastics team to whom three victims came forward about the sexual assaults they experienced.

The FBI field office in Indianapolis and the US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Indiana concluded there was no legal venue to be found in the city, since it had no connection to any of the alleged illegal activity. Both offices also seriously questioned whether the allegations against Nassar fell under federal jurisdiction and opted not to advise the state or local authorities about them.

The US gymnastics team reiterated their concern to the FBI field office in Los Angeles that led to launching a formal investigation but similarly did not contact any state or local authorities despite the fact that state laws were violated. In addition, the investigation likewise failed to take any action to mitigate the risk to gymnasts.

Nassar was arrested following a Michigan State University Police and FBI Lansing resident office investigation that led to the discovery of 30,000 child pornography materials on his electronic devices. In total, more than 260 women and girls have claimed that they were sexually assaulted by Nassar.

In January 2018, Nassar was sentenced to 175 years in prison for sexually abusing minors - the young female athletes who were entrusted to his care as a doctor.

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Ukraine Bid to Unite Orthodox Church Failed for Canonical Reasons - Russian Metropolitan

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Ukraine President Petro Poroshenko's efforts to unite Orthodox Christian believers in the country in one church failed for canonical reasons, the Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) said at a summit.

"There was an attempt by former President Petro Poroshenko to unite these groups. The attempt failed for purely canonical ecclesiastical reasons," the Metropolitan said at the International Religious Freedom summit in Washington on Wednesday..

In 2018, the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine of the Kiev Patriarchate (UOC-KP) was formed via the merger of two other non-canonical branches of Orthodoxy in the country at the initiative of then-President Petro Poroshenko and the patriarchate of Constantinople.

The following year, Bartholomew I handed over the tomos of autocephaly, the decree of independence, to the UOC-KP. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), along with the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is historically a part of the Moscow Patriarchate, refused to recognize this. The Moscow Patriarchate has described the situation as the "legalization of schism," stressing that it would have catastrophic consequences and affect millions of Christians in Ukraine and other countries.

Metropolitan Hilarion said the Russian Orthodox Church is not only the church of the Russian Federation, it has a canonical jurisdiction in other countries of the former Russian Empire, as well as in China and Japan.

The Ukrainian Orthodox Church, the largest one in Ukraine, has canonical and spiritual ties with the larger Russian Orthodox Church, and maintains autonomy and self-governance within it.

"In the Ukrainian case we have an example of the violation of human rights and right of certain Orthodox Christians," the Metropolitan said.

After the formation of the new jurisdiction, it seized hundreds of church buildings previously belonging to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, he said.

"About 500 churches were switched to another jurisdiction, and some of them were taken by violence. In some villages, we have priests and believers who do not have church buildings and pray in the field," he said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik)

KERRY'S VISIT TO MOSCOW

* Russian President Vladimir Putin and US Special Envoy John Kerry discussed climate issues during a phone conversation on Wednesday, the Kremlin said.

* Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Chernyshenko and Kerry met in Moscow and discussed the problem of climate change, Chernyshenko's office said.

IRAN NUCLEAR AGREEMENT

* The United States categorically condemns Iran's alleged plot to kidnap a journalist but intends to continue dialogue with the Islamic Republic on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

PROTESTS IN CUBA

* The US government is calling on Cuban authorities to promptly release the protesters detained over the recent days, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

* The protests in Cuba over the weekend will have an impact on the United States' ongoing review of its policy toward the island nation, Psaki said.

RUSSIA-BELARUS RELATIONS

* Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin discussed during their meeting in St. Petersburg earlier this week the response of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member states to threats in Central Asia in connection with the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the press secretary of the Belarusian leader, Natalya Eismont, said on Wednesday.

* Lukashenko and Putin discussed during their meeting in St. Petersburg earlier this week the problem of NATO's increasing presence in Ukraine, Eismont, said.

* Lukashenko and Putin instructed the governments of the two countries to develop a joint plan to counter Western sanctions, Eismont, said.

CORONAVIRUS VACCINES

* Russia faces politicization of the situation regarding coronavirus vaccines and has an extremely negative attitude towards it, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

* Paris police used tear gas to disperse the protesters against the introduction of vaccine passports, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* Russia resumes flights with France and the Czech Republic beginning on July 24, the federal coronavirus response center told reporters.

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Canada Working on Ensuring 'Right Paths' for Afghan Translators - Trudeau

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is exploring pathways to help Afghan interpreters who are facing imminent danger amid the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"We will continue to work to ensure we're providing the right paths, and I can assure you our ministers are working on that," Trudeau said in response to a question regarding potential Canadian efforts to help Afghan interpreters.

According to current projections, the Taliban (banned in Russia) is on track to reclaim control over Afghanistan after foreign troops complete their withdrawal, which would leave translators for NATO forces, who the terror group views as traitors, in a precarious position.

On Tuesday, the US Central Command said the troop withdrawal from Afghanistan is more than 95 percent complete. Meanwhile, reports suggest that the Taliban movement now controls 85 percent of Afghanistan.

The evacuation of Afghan interpreters is also a hot topic in the United States, where officials have said that aides to the US mission in Afghanistan will be relocated to third countries while their special immigrant visas are processed.

The Canadian military, which was primarily active in Kandahar, exited the Afghan war in 2014.

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Coronavirus Cases Spike in Many Nations of Americas, Caribbean - PAHO Director

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Coronavirus infections surged throughout Central America, the Caribbean and some South American nations in the most recent reporting week, Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) Director Carissa Etienne said on Wednesday.

"We are all tired, but after experiencing successive peaks of infections in the same locations, we must break this cycle by embracing public health measures early and consistently," Etienne said in a press release.

Cases are increasing in Central American countries, including El Salvador and Guatemala, where COVID-19 deaths have also surged, the release said.

New infections are also spiking in the Caribbean, where Cuba has reported the highest number of weekly cases since the start of the pandemic. In the British Virgin Islands, cases have tripled in the weeks after reopening to cruise ships. And in Mexico and the United States, infections are rising, the release said.

In total, the Americas has reported nearly 74 million COVID-19 cases and 1.9 million deaths – more than a third of COVID cases and more than 40 percent of deaths reported globally, the release said.

Many, but not all nations in the Americas continue to suffer from low vaccinated rates, the release added.

While 58 percent Chile's population are fully protected against the disease and in Uruguay 55 percent are protected, Paraguay and Jamaica have fully vaccinated less than 3 percent of their populations. Honduras and Guatemala have yet to vaccinate 1% of their populations, according to the release.

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Record High House Prices in US Not Result of 'Irresponsible Lending' - Powell

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - House prices in the United States have hit record highs because of limited supply and an explosion in demand, not because banks were giving out loans recklessly, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Wednesday.

Material shortages, such as lumber, have curtailed home building and restricted the number of available homes on the market while low mortgage rates have enticed those looking to move out of large cities and buy larger homes in the suburbs, Powell said.

"It's not reckless, irresponsible lending" similar to the run-up to the 2007-2008 financial crisis, Powell told Congress in his semi-annual testimony on monetary policy.

The median existing house price accelerated a record 23.6 percent from a year ago to an all-time high of \$350,300 in May, with sales remaining skewed toward bigger and more expensive homes.

Powell said the Federal Reserve is not trying to provide support directly to any industry, including the housing industry.

"Yes, low mortgage rates do indirectly or directly support the housing industry. But it's not that we're looking at the housing market and thinking this is for the housing market. It's really more that we want to support overall demand, And we want to support them, because we're still a long way from maximum employment and we think it's appropriate," Powell added.

Ensuring maximum employment is one of the Federal Reserve's two mandates. The other is to keep inflation at a sustainable rate that is not harmful to the economy, typically at around 2 percent a year.

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US to Appoint New Envoy for Religious Freedom in Weeks - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – The United States will soon appoint an envoy for international religious freedom in near future, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"We are looking forward to appointing an ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom in the coming weeks. We will continue to work closely with civil society organizations to combat all forms of religiously motivated hatred," Blinken said at the International Religious Freedom summit in Washington.

Religious freedom is co-equal with other human rights, he added.

"When that freedom is jeopardized, the others are too," he said.

Blinken underscored that religious freedom represents a vital component of US diplomacy.

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US Legislation Seeks Repeal of COVID-19 Mask Mandate on Public Transport - Senator

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Legislation introduced by Republicans in both chambers of Congress would repeal a requirement that all passengers on public transportation wear facemasks to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, US Senator Rand Paul said on Wednesday.

"The federal government forcing the American people to continue to wear masks despite the fact that we've already reached herd immunity is ridiculous and needs to end immediately," Paul said in a press release announcing the legislation. "I am introducing the Travel Mask Mandate Repeal Act of 2021 to put a stop to this nanny state mandate."

Paul, a practicing physician prior to entering politics, rejects claims by public health officials that vaccination rates need to increase beyond the nearly 70 percent of US adults who have received at least one dose to achieve herd immunity.

In contrast, Paul claims that natural immunity of recovered COVID-19 victims, when added to vaccination numbers, places the United States above a herd-immunity threshold needed to protect the entire population.

Although the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) advises that vaccinated individuals do not need masks in most situations, face coverings are still required in schools, healthcare facilities, airports and all types of public transportation.

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Multiple Failures in FBI Probe of Ex-US Gymnastics Team Doctor - Justice Dept. Report

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – There were multiple failures in the FBI's Indianapolis Field Office investigation of allegations of sexual abuse by former USA Gymnastics physician Lawrence Gerard Nassar during his almost 20 years of treating the athletes, the Office of Inspector General (OIG) of the Department of Justice said on Wednesday.

"The OIG found that, despite the extraordinarily serious nature of the allegations and the possibility that Nassar's conduct could be continuing, senior officials in the FBI Indianapolis Field Office failed to respond to the Nassar allegations with the utmost seriousness and urgency that they deserved and required, made numerous and fundamental errors when they did respond to them, and violated multiple FBI policies," the report said.

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US Republican Senators Urge Biden to Keep Health Restrictions on Border-Crossing Migrants

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – A group of 46 Republican Senators urged President Joe Biden in a letter on Wednesday to keep health restrictions in place that have allowed officials to quickly expel more than half of the migrants apprehended crossing the southwestern US border. The Biden administration plans to end health a health provision known as Title 42 before the end of the month, according to media reports.

"Ending this order will have a dire impact on the crisis already engulfing our southwestern border we urge you in the strongest possible terms not to take this action," the letter said, as read by Senator John Barrasso at a press conference.

The letter was signed by 46 Senate Republicans including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell. Senators flanking Barrasso at the press conference warned that ending Title 42 would remove the one measure that has allowed border officials to impose some limits on a flood of illegal border crossers that they blamed on Biden's decision to halt construction of a border wall and reverse other measures imposed during the Trump administration.

Of more than 180,000 migrants apprehended in May – the highest monthly total in more than 20 years - more than 110,000 were returned using the health measure, Senators said.

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US Slams Taliban Murder of Afghan Commandos as 'Atrocious', Says 'No Doubt' Video Real

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the killing of the Afghan commandos at the hands of the Taliban group (banned in Russia), US State Department spokesman Ned Price said, adding that there is no doubt that the footage circulated by media was authentic.

Earlier in the day, CNN posted a video allegedly showing Taliban fighters execute 22 members of the Afghan Special Forces unit. The killings reportedly took place on June 16 in Faryab province, in the north of the country close to Turkmenistan. The Taliban, in the meantime, denied the executions.

"The video - which I should say we don't have any reason to doubt - depicts horrifying scenes, the killing - in this case - the slaughter of unarmed individuals is an atrocious act, an outrageous sight and of course, we condemn it," Price said.

Afghanistan is seeing a spike in violence from the Taliban as international troops are gradually being withdrawn from the country. The troop pullout was one of the points of agreement the Taliban and the United States reached in Doha in February of last year. In early July, the Pentagon said that the US has withdrawn over 95% of American military personnel and equipment from Afghanistan.

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US Has A Labor Shortage Problem Despite Stubborn Unemployment - Fed Beige Book

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Scarcity of labor supply remains a problem for the US economy, with employers continuously citing a shortage of workers despite stubborn unemployment, the Federal Reserve said in its monthly Beige Book report on Wednesday that chronicles activity in the country's 12 banking districts.

"Labor shortages were often cited as a reason firms could not staff at desired levels, with firms in three districts delaying expansion or scaling back services due to understaffing," the report said.

The dearth of labor supply doesn't appear to be waning anytime soon, with firms in several districts expecting "the difficulty finding workers to extend into the early fall," the Fed added. The update came as Fed Chair Jerome Powell continued to suggest there was still a long way for the economy to achieve "substantial further progress" on maximum unemployment, and downplayed inflation fears.

The inflation numbers "have been higher than expected and hoped for, but they're actually still consistent with what we've been talking about," Powell said in his semi-annual testimony before the House Financial Services Committee on Wednesday. "It's just the perfect storm of high demand and low supply, and it should pass."

The United States lost more than 21 million jobs between March and April 2020, at the height of business lockdowns forced by the coronavirus. About 8 million of those jobs have not returned, officials say.

The US economy itself shrank by 3.5 percent in 2020 due to lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19. Since the start of this year, growth has exceeded expectations, with a first-quarter expansion of 6.4 percent.

The Fed has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021 although Powell has said he did not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to occur anytime soon. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.9 percent in June, a notch higher than May's 5.8 percent.

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Christian Population Decreasing in Mideast Due to Balance Violation - Russian Metropolitan

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The number of Christians has significantly decreased in almost all countries in the Middle East because the long-term balance between the religious communities was violated, Russian Orthodox Church External Relations Department head Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) said on Wednesday.

"We see that in many countries people suffer because of their faith. Especially troubling is the situation in the Middle East, where unfortunately in all countries the Christian population is decreasing - in some countries drastically, in some countries slowly," Hilarion said during the International Religious Freedom Summit in Washington.

The Metropolitan linked the "rapid decrease" of the number of Christians in Syria with the emergence of extremists who took power in many regions of that country. Similarly, the number of Christians in Iraq shrank by about 90 percent, he said.

"If 15 years ago there were 1.5 million of Christians in Iraq, now there are probably 150,000, if not less. Moreover, there is practically no Christian population left in Libya," he said.

Hilarion pointed out that violating the balance that existed between different religious communities became the major reason of such deterioration in the number of Christians. The balance was disturbed by the involvement of external powers and with promises that the democracy would be introduced, he said.

"But, in fact, there is no democracy in Iraq or in Libya. We see that the situation is very chaotic and Christians became the first victims of this dramatic situation," Hilarion added.

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California Homeopathic Doctor Charged in Fake COVID-19 Vaccination Scheme - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - A homeopathic doctor from California was arrested and charged for her alleged role in a scheme to defraud and endanger the public by producing fake COVID-19 vaccination cards and treatments, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Juli A. Mazi, 41, of Napa, is charged with one count of wire fraud and one count of false statements related to health care matters. The case is the first federal criminal fraud prosecution related to homeoprophylaxis immunizations and fraudulent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) COVID-19 vaccination record cards," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Mazi allegedly sold homeoprophylaxis immunization pellets to patients that she said contained the COVID-19 virus and would create an antibody response in the immune system. She also sent COVID-19 vaccination cards, listed as Moderna, to the patients, allegedly instructing them to falsely state that they received the vaccine on the date that they ingested the immunization pellets.

The case came to the attention of law enforcement following reports from family members who were concerned after hearing about what Mazi was purportedly doing filed complaints through a Health and Human Services hotline.

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US Sees 2nd Largest Crude Oil Draw For Year Amid Summer Demand for Fuel - EIA

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States saw the year's second-largest drawdown in crude oil stockpiles last week, according to data from the Energy Information Administration on Wednesday that indicated no letup in the blistering summer demand for fuel.

US crude oil inventories have fallen for eight weeks in a row, drawing almost 50 million barrels combined, the EIA data showed. For the latest week to July 9, the draw was 7.9 million barrels. That was the largest since the 8.0 million barrels reported for the week to May 3.

The big summer draws for crude come as US refiners focus on pushing out as much gasoline as possible to meet projected demand during the peak driving season in the country. According to the EIA, refiners operated last week at 91.8 percent of capacity, at around levels last seen in the summer of 2019 — well before the onset of the pandemic last year.

Stockpiles of gasoline rose by 1.04 million barrels last week, versus forecasts for a drawdown of 1.5 million barrels — demonstrating the stepped-up refining activity.

Inventories of distillates, which include diesel and heating oil, rose by 3.66 million barrels, versus a forecast build of 1.0 million barrels above the previous week's rise of 1.62 million. The distillates number proved that demand for trucking and other commercial transportation fuels had not taken off in the same way as gasoline for private cars.

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US Concerned Over Continued Detentions of Egyptian Civil Society Leaders - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States shares its concern over the continued detentions of civil society leaders in Egypt, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"The United States is concerned by continued detentions, indictments and harassments of the Egyptian civil society leaders, academics and journalists, including the indictment of the director-general of the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights Hossam Bahgat," Price said during a press briefing.

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Canada Court Grants Spy Agency New Sweeping Powers to Run Operations in Foreign Countries

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The Federal Court of Canada has granted the country's spy agency sweeping new powers to conduct operations in foreign countries, decisions unsealed on Wednesday revealed.

The two rulings allow the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS), with the assistance of the country's communications intelligence service and the Communications Security Establishment (CSE), to conduct operations on foreign soil.

The operations include work in conjunction with a host country's domestic security agencies as well as covert work in violation of a sovereign nation's laws.

Judge Simon Noel upheld five sections and subsections of the CSIS Act, which was amended by the Canadian parliament in 2015 to grant the spy agency the increased mandate. Noel said in a ruling on February 17 that he issued the supplementary reasons to state unequivocally that CSIS does have the authority to use the powers authorized in the warrants he signed without regard to the law of a foreign state, as per subsection 21(3.1) of the CSIS Act.

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US to Continue Nuclear Deal Talks With Iran Despite Alleged Kidnapping Plot - White House

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States categorically condemns Iran's alleged plot to kidnap a journalist but intends to continue dialogue with the Islamic Republic on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"Overall... we categorically condemn Iran's dangerous and despicable reported plot to kidnap a US citizen on US soil," Psaki said. "But at the same time, we still see in US interest and in our national interest to engage in ongoing discussions so that we have kind of greater visibility into Iran's path to acquiring a nuclear weapons."

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US Senator Seeks Full Accounting of Costs From Biden Canceling Wall Border With Mexico

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - A detailed account of costs stemming from the Biden administration's decision to halt construction of a wall on the US-Mexico border was requested in a letter to Defense Department (DoD) CFO Michael McCord, Senior US House Budget Committee Republican Jason Smith said on Wednesday.

"The letter... requested the DoD provide a detailed explanation of the total amount of funds spent on litigation and settlement disputes related to border wall contracts, the total number of cancelled contracts, and the total amount of funds the Department intends to spend on settling canceled contracts," Smith said in a press release.

The letter marked the latest salvo in an ongoing efforts by House to exercise oversight related to a record surge of migrants crossing the border since President Joe Biden's inauguration in January, the release said.

In April, Smith and senior Republican on the US House Oversight Committee James Comer called on the Biden administration to explain plans to provide billions of dollars to Northern Triangle countries without corresponding incentives to discourage migration, the release added. The United States apprehended more than 180,000 migrants crossing the southern border in May, the highest monthly total in more than two decades, according to the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency.

One of President Biden's first acts as president was to halt construction of the border wall, a project championed by former President Donald Trump and dismissed by Democrats.

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UPDATE - Andrew Brown's Family Sues 10 Officers in N. Carolina Involved in His Death - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The family of black man Andrew Brown filed a federal lawsuit against ten police officers involved in his death during an attempted arrest in the US state of North Carolina, claiming their acts were unlawful, attorney Harry Daniels said on Wednesday.

Brown was shot and killed by police in Elizabeth City in April after attempting to flee from officers who were executing a warrant for his arrest. The officers said they shot Brown when he attempted to use his car as a deadly weapon while trying to evade capture.

"This morning we filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of the Brown family in the state of Andrew Brown in the Eastern District of North Carolina," Daniels said during a press conference. "This lawsuit is filed against investigator Daniel Meads, Deputy Sheriff Robert Morgan, Corporal Aaron Lewellyn, Steven Judd, Sergeant Michael Swindell, Sergeant Kenneth Bishop, Sergeant Joel Lunsford, Sheriff Tommy Wooten, Sheriff Doug Doughtie [and two] officers that have not been identified."

Daniels said the lawsuit claims the officer-involved shooting was an intentional wrongful death, assault and battery. The lawsuit also claims the policies of the Dare County Sheriff's Office and Pasquotank County Sheriff's Office enabled the officers to go to Brown's home to "execute him." Daniels also said that the plaintiffs are seeking \$30 million.

Brown's death was among several police shootings of black men in recent years that have sparked widespread protests and calls for reforms.

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White House Spokesperson Provides No Date for US-Russia Strategic Stability Talks

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Jen Psaki on Wednesday did not disclose a date when the inaugural round of US-Russian strategic stability consultations may take place.

"In terms of strategic stability talks, I don't have anything in terms of a timeline," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Consultations between Russia and the United States on strategic stability will be held in a week,

Earlier on Wednesday, Russian diplomatic sources said the consultations between the United States and Russia will be held in a week, adding that Moscow is calling for talks on all types of weapons.

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US Still Reviewing Haiti's Request for Troops, Additional Aid - White House
WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is still reviewing Haiti's request for additional aid and troops after the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"We've also responded to a number of their specific requests in terms of personnel and aid and assistance on the law enforcement front as they are working to move the investigation forward. In terms of additional considerations or considerations of requests for troops that is still an ongoing review," Psaki said.

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Canada Levels Sanctions Against 15 Nicaraguan Officials, Ortega Allies - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Canada has imposed sanctions on 15 senior Nicaraguan officials and allies of President Daniel Ortega citing alleged human rights violations in the Central American country, Global Affairs Canada said on Wednesday.

"Marc Garneau, Minister of Foreign Affairs, announced sanctions against an additional 15 individuals under the Special Economic Measures (Nicaragua) Regulations in response to ongoing human rights violations in Nicaragua," Global Affairs Canada said in a statement. The sanctions affect 14 senior Nicaraguan officials, including the country's Attorney General Ana Julia Guido, central banker Leonardo Ovidio Reyes and finance chief Ivan Adolfo Acosta, as well as Jose Jorge Mojica, who is alleged to be the Ortega family's financial frontman. All of the individuals targeted by the Canadian government have previously been subject to US sanctions.

Canada has previously sanctioned nine Nicaraguans under the country's Special Economic Measures Act.

The sanctions freeze all assets the designated individuals may hold in Canada and prohibit Canadians' engagement in financial dealings with them.

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US Calls for 'Swift Release' of Cuban Protesters - White House

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The US government is calling on Cuban authorities to promptly release the protesters detained over the recent days, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki told reporters on Wednesday.

"We continue to call for the swift release of those peaceful protesters who have been unjustly detained," Psaki said during a press briefing.

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US Invests \$153Mln in Bid to Promote Biopharmaceutical Manufacturing - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Two US government awards totaling \$153 million will help fund a public-private partnership designed to accelerate innovation in the biopharmaceutical industry, Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Wednesday.

Raimondo announced the funding at the annual meeting of the Commerce Department's National Institute for Innovation in Manufacturing Biopharmaceuticals (NIIMBL), a public-private partnership designed to accelerate innovation in the US biopharmaceutical industry.

"This important investment for America, funded in part by President [Joe] Biden's American Rescue Plan, will help meet the nation's need for lifesaving biopharmaceuticals," Raimondo said in a subsequent press release.

NIIMBL produces vaccines, monoclonal antibodies, gene therapies and other medical products derived from biological sources, the release said.

The first of the two awards renews federal sponsorship of NIIMBL with \$70 million over the next five years, with matching investments from the private sector, the release added.

The second award will provide \$83 million to NIIMBL over three years from the American Rescue Plan to prevent and respond to future outbreaks of the coronavirus, according to the release.

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UN in Afghanistan Says Increasingly Concerned By Number of Alleged Human Rights Abuses

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) said on Wednesday that it is increasingly concerned about the number of alleged human rights violations committed amid the ongoing military offensive in the country.

"The United Nations in Afghanistan is increasingly concerned with the number of reported serious human rights abuses and violations alleged in communities most affected by the ongoing military offensive across the country," UNAMA said in a statement.

UNAMA said the reports of killing, persecution and discrimination are widespread and create fear and insecurity. Those responsible for such acts must be held to account, it also said.

UNAMA calls on all parties in Afghanistan to announce an Eid ceasefire to give Afghans a respite from the conflict and contribute toward political negotiations, the statement added.

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Bezos' Blue Origin Foundation Picks 19 Space-Related Charities, Each to Get \$1M In Grant

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Club for the Future, a foundation of the US aerospace company Blue Origin owned by Jeff Bezos has selected 19 space-related groups which will receive a \$1 million grant, the company said on Wednesday.

"Today, Blue Origin's foundation, Club for the Future, announced 19 non-profit charitable organizations will each be offered a \$1 million grant to inspire future generations to pursue careers in STEM [Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] and help invent the future of life in space. The funds are made possible by the recent auction for the first paid seat on Blue Origin's New Shepard rocket," the company said.

The American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, the Astronaut Scholarship Foundation, AstraFemina, a group of astronauts and academic professionals, are among the charities which were chosen.

Blue Origin's New Shepard will take Bezos, his brother Mark, and Wally Funk, an 82-year old female pilot, to space July 20. The system features a single booster topped with a crew capsule designed to carry paying space tourists to the edge of outer space, about 60 miles above Earth's surface. After separating, the capsule will float for a few minutes in microgravity before returning to Earth with parachutes while the reusable booster rocket lands on its own.

Meanwhile, Blue Origin CEO Bob Smith noted that the recent auction for the seat on New Shepard resulted in a donation of \$28 million to the foundation.

"This donation is enabling Club for the Future to rapidly expand its reach by partnering with 19 organizations to develop and inspire the next generation of space professionals. Our generation will build the road to space and these efforts will ensure the next generation is ready to go even further," he added.

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Protests in Cuba Will Affect US Policy Review - White House

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The protests in Cuba over the weekend will have an impact on the United States' ongoing review of its policy toward the island nation, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said in a press briefing on Wednesday.

"There's no question that the protests over the weekend and the events in the last couple of days are significant events, the largest protests we've seen in Cuba in a long time, that will obviously have an impact on how we proceed," Psaki said. "We will see how things develop in

the days ahead and develop our policy responses accordingly. We don't want to do it as a one off, we want to look at it with a comprehensive approach in mind."

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White House Confirms It Will Start to Relocate Afghans Who Supported US Last Week of July

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - White House Spokesperson Jen Psaki confirmed on Wednesday the operation to relocate Afghan nationals who supported the United States will begin in the last week of July.

"We are launching what we are calling Operation Allies Refuge to support relocation flights for interested and eligible Afghan nationals and their families who have supported the United States and our partners in Afghanistan and are in the SIV [Special Immigrant Visas] application pipeline," Psaki said in a press briefing. "I can confirm that flights out of Afghanistan for SIV applicants who are already in the pipeline will begin in the last week of July and will continue." Psaki added the United States aims to relocate eligible individuals out of the Islamic Republic before the withdrawal of US troops at the end of August.

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Blinken Urges Armenia's Pashinyan to Continue Reforms After Election - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke over the telephone with Armenian acting Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and emphasized the need to continue democratic after the recent parliamentary elections, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a readout of the conversation on Wednesday.

"The Secretary offered hearty congratulations to the people of Armenia following the June 20 elections, in which the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights found that voters' fundamental rights and freedoms were generally respected, and contestants were able to campaign freely," Price said. "He urged continued democratic reforms."

Blinken also underscored the United States' support for the Minsk Group co-chairs process on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

"He encouraged Armenia to engage constructively at the OSCE," Price said. "Blinken reaffirmed his support for the expeditious return of all Armenian detainees from Azerbaijan to Armenia."

On June 21, Armenia held snap parliamentary elections. Pashinyan's Civil Contract party won with 53.91 percent of the vote and the Armenia bloc of former President Robert Kocharyan won 21.9 percent of the vote.

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Andrew Brown's Family Sues 10 Officers in N. Carolina Involved in His Death - Lawyer
WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The family of Andrew Brown filed a federal lawsuit against ten law enforcement police officers involved in his death during an attempted arrest in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in April, claiming their acts were unlawful, attorney Harry Daniels said on Wednesday.

Brown was shot and killed by police in Elizabeth City after attempting to flee from officers who were executing a warrant for his arrest. The officers said they shot Brown when he attempted to use his car as a deadly weapon while trying to evade capture.

"This morning we filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of the Brown family in the state of Andrew Brown in the Eastern District of North Carolina," Daniels said during a press conference. "This lawsuit is filed against investigator Daniel Meads, Deputy Sheriff Robert Morgan, Corporal Aaron Lewellyn, Steven Judd, Sergeant Michael Swindell, Sergeant Kenneth Bishop, Sergeant Joel Lunsford, Sheriff Tommy Wooten, Sheriff Doug Doughtie [and two] officers that have not been identified."

Daniels said the lawsuit claims the officer-involved shooting was an intentional wrongful death, assault and battery. The lawsuit also claims the policies of the Dare County Sheriff's Office and Pasquotank County Sheriff's Office enabled the officers to go to Brown's home to "execute him." Daniels also said that the plaintiffs are seeking \$30 million.

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Boeing Partners With US Sustainable Jet Fuel Producer in Bid to Cut Carbon Emissions

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – Boeing and the sustainable jet fuel producer SkyNRg former a partnership in a bid to expand global use of the alternative fuel that reduces emissions of carbon, the companies said on Wednesday.

"Sustainable aviation fuels are safe, proven and offer the greatest potential to reduce our industry's carbon emissions in the near, medium and long term," Boeing Chief Sustainability Officer Chris Raymond said in a joint press release by the two companies.

The ultimate goal is to "decarbonize aerospace" while ensuring that "societal and economic benefits are available to people everywhere," Raymond added.

Boeing will also invest an unspecified amount in a SkyNRG fuel production project in the United States, for which Alaska Airlines is a previously announced partner, the release said.

SkyNRG said in a previous announcement with Alaska Airlines and Microsoft that its fuel is created from waste oils and agricultural residues. The fuel reduces carbon emissions by about 75 percent compared with fossil-fuel-based jet fuel.

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France's Le Drian Urges Global Community to Modernize WTO to Ensure More Competition
WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - French Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian on Wednesday called on the international community to reform the World Trade Organization (WTO) to achieve more competition.

"This is also the case for the World Trade Organization, which we must modernize and reform in order to achieve international trade rules that are more transparent and that ensure more competition," Le Drian said in his remarks while on his visit to Washington.

Le Drian added that in this effort, the European Union must be a vital partner of the United States.

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Obamacare, Other Programs Enroll Over 2M In With Extended Deadline - US Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's expanded enrollment period for Obamacare and other subsidized health services allowed more than 2 million Americans to obtain medical insurance, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) said on Wednesday.

"The June Marketplace SEP [special enrollment period] report shows that since February 15, 1.5 million Americans have signed up on HealthCare.gov with an additional 600,000 enrolling in coverage through the 15 state-based marketplaces," an HHS press release said.

The Biden administration special enrollment period runs until August 15, the release noted.

The Affordable Care Act, better known as Obamacare, expanded access to federally subsidized health insurance sold through on-line marketplaces such as HealthCare.gov. Obamacare also expanded access to Medicaid, a state-run program for low-income Americans.

By February 2021, enrollment in Medicaid and the separate Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) had reached a record high 81 million, the release said.

Recent court decisions have protected Obamacare from lawsuits filed during the Trump administration in an attempt eliminate the program based on claims that it was unconstitutional.

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Biden Orders Launching Flights in July to Relocate Afghans Who Supported US - Official

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden directed the launching of flights this month to relocate eligible Afghan nationals who were deployed on behalf of the US government and their families, a senior administration official circulated on social media on Tuesday.

"At President Biden's direction, the United States is launching Operation Allies Refuge to support relocation flights for interested and eligible Afghan nationals and their families who have supported the United States and our partners in Afghanistan and are in SIV [Special Immigrant Visas] application pipeline," the official said. "Flights out of Afghanistan for SIV applicants who are already in the pipeline will begin in the last week of July."

The official also said the details about when flights will depart would not be disclosed for operational security reasons.

The State Department Coordination Unit, which will have representatives from the departments of Defense and of Homeland Security, will be leading the operation.

The Defense Department has said the US had withdrawn more than 95 percent of its military personnel and equipment from Afghanistan while Biden said the withdrawal would be finished by August 31.

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Nearly 2Mln Applications for US Passport in Backlog Following Covid Pandemic - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Between 1.5 and 2 million passport applications are in backlog as the US State Department is surging staff to decrease the processing times to pre-coronavirus pandemic levels, Bureau of Consular Affairs Deputy Assistant Secretary for Passport Services Rachel Arndt said on Wednesday.

"The pandemic's disruptions continue to have a ripple effect on all steps of the passport process, including the amount of time it currently takes us to process a passport application. We are surging staff both adjudicators and contractors back into the office at agencies across the country as COVID-19 restrictions," Arndt said during a press briefing. "Our backlog currently is somewhere in the range of a million and a half to two million applications."

Arndt noted that it will take time for the current wait times of 12 to 18 weeks to fall to pre-pandemic levels, which means that citizens who submit new passport applications today will not get their new passport until late in the fall.

More than 150 passport services staffers will be returning this summer to 21 offices across the United States, Arndt said.

The processing times were greatly affected by the pandemic since passport specialists need to be physically in the office to process the passport and that was impossible due to the COVID-19 restrictions that lasted more than a year, Arndt added.

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Sullivan, France's Le Drian Trade Views on China, Russia, Iran, Lebanon - White House
WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian discussed China, Russia, Iran and Lebanon at a meeting on Wednesday, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne announced.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met today with Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian of France and reaffirmed the strong bilateral ties between our countries... They exchanged views on a range of shared foreign policy interests, including China, Russia, Iran, and Lebanon. They also discussed rising instability in the Sahel and their commitment to sustained counterterrorism cooperation," the statement said.

The sides also welcomed the outcomes of the US-EU Summit and NATO Summit in June and "pledged to work together to ensure the Alliance's adaptation to diverse security threats," the statement added.

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Bank of Canada Cuts Growth Forecast for 2021, Says Inflation to Remain Elevated into 2022

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Canadian economic growth will be less than expected in 2021, while inflation will remain elevated into 2022, the Bank of Canada said on Wednesday.

"We now expect the economy to expand by around 6 percent in 2021- slightly weaker than our April forecast," Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem said in his prepared remarks, discussing the central bank's Monetary Policy Report.

The Bank of Canada had expected the economy to grow 6.5 percent in 2021, however, weaker than anticipated economic activity in the first half of 2021, as a result of the coronavirus pandemic measures during the so-called "third wave," led to the revision.

The central bank, however, anticipates a strong rebound in the third quarter of 2021 and revised its outlook for 2022, forecasting 4.6 percent GDP growth, up from the expected 3.7 percent increase.

The Bank of Canada also expects consumer price index (CPI) inflation to remain at or above the 3 percent mark throughout the duration of 2021, dipping to the target rate of 2 percent sometime in 2022. Inflation is expected to rise above the target threshold beyond 2022 and again return to 2 percent in 2024.

Elevated consumer price inflation is temporary, the Bank of Canada asserts, citing the presence of "short-run imbalances" and substantial slack in the economy.

The Bank of Canada noted the significant level of slack in the country's labor market, saying that the 550,000 new jobs would be needed to match pre-pandemic employment levels.

The forecast is contingent upon several factors, including continued economic recovery

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Security Council Renews UN Mission Mandate to Support Yemen Ceasefire Agreement

UNITED NATIONS, July 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council on Wednesday unanimously adopted a resolution renewing the mandate of the United Nations mission to support Yemen's ceasefire agreement for another year.

The resolution "Decides to extend until July 15, 2022, the mandate of the United Nations Mission to support the Hudaydah Agreement (UNMHA), to support the implementation of the Agreement on the City of Hudaydah and Ports of Hudaydah, Salif and Ras Issa as set out in the Stockholm Agreement."

After the government of Yemen and the rebel Houthi movement reached the Hudaydah agreement in December 2018, the UN Security Council established the UNMHA to monitor and support the implementation of the ceasefire and redeployment of forces.

The new resolution calls on the parties in Yemen to work toward ensuring the stability of Hudaydah, but also demands an end to the obstruction of movement of UNMHA personnel. Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between the government forces and the Houthi movement for more than six years. The situation further deteriorated after the Saudi-led coalition of Arab states entered the conflict on the side of the government in 2015.

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US Inflation to Stay High Near Term, Fed Stimulus to Continue - Chairman Powell

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US inflation will likely remain elevated in the near term, prodding the Federal Reserve to continue with its stimulus support for the economy, Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"Inflation has increased notably and will likely remain elevated in coming months before moderating. Inflation is being temporarily boosted by base effects, as the sharp pandemic-related price declines from last spring drop out of the 12-month calculation," Powell said in his prepared semi-annual testimony to Congress on monetary policy.

As such, the Fed chief said the central bank was "still a ways off" from any slowing of the \$120 billion-per-month bond purchases it has been making to stimulate the economy. A rollback of the Fed stimulus for the economy, popularly known as the taper, has kept financial markets on tenterhooks for months.

"As we have said, we will provide advance notice before announcing any decision to make changes to our purchases," Powell said.

Aside from bond purchases, the central bank had kept interest rates at between zero and a quarter percent since the outbreak of the coronavirus in March 2020.

"These measures, along with our strong guidance on interest rates and on our balance sheet, will ensure that monetary policy will continue to deliver powerful support to the economy until the recovery is complete," he said.

Commodity-fueled inflation has become a hot-button issue in the United States since late last year, when COVID-19 vaccine breakthroughs unleashed price rallies in most raw materials amid forecasts for rapid economic recovery from the pandemic. Constraints in supply chains seeing

explosive demand after months of lax activity have added to the upward price pressure in most commodities.

Trillions of dollars of aid poured by the government into the economy to alleviate the burden of ordinary Americans has also lined the pockets of some, helping them to buy properties and stocks that have further abetted inflation.

Adding to this, the White House said last week monopoly by players in key US industries has led to tripling mark-ups in prices of necessities such as prescription drugs, hearing aids and internet service.

The Producer Price Index, which measures the average changes in prices received by domestic producers for their output, rose by 7.3 percent or its most in 11 years in June, the Labor Department said Wednesday.

A day earlier, the Commerce Department said the Consumer Price Index grew by 5.4 percent over a one-year period in June for its largest increase in 13 years.

The Fed's preferred inflation gauge — the core PCE, or Personal Consumption Expenditures, Index, which strips out volatile food and energy prices — rose by a multiyear high of 3.4 percent in the 12 months to May. June figures are now yet available.

The US economy itself shrank by 3.5 percent in 2020 due to lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19. Since the start of this year, growth has exceeded expectations, with a first quarter expansion of 6.4 percent.

The Fed has forecast a 6.5 percent economic growth for all of 2021 although Powell has said he did not expect "full employment" — defined by a monthly unemployment rate of 4.0 percent or lower — to occur anytime soon. The monthly unemployment rate stood at 5.9 percent in June. On Tuesday, Powell said the balance sheets of households and businesses were "very healthy" and core financial institutions were "resilient", but the labor market still had "a long way to go", adding that this was another reason for the Fed to continue with stimulus efforts.

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US Drug Overdose Deaths Set Record, Top 93,000 in 2020 - Health Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - More than 93,000 Americans died from drug overdoses in 2020, the highest toll ever recorded, according to provisional data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on Wednesday.

For the 12 month period ending in December 2020, actual overdose deaths reported were 92,183 with the "predicted number of deaths" of 93,331 - the latter estimate including fatalities still being investigated, the CDC said in a report.

This is the highest number of overdose deaths ever recorded in a 12-month period, and the largest increase since at least 1999, Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), said in a statement as cited by US media.

Overdose deaths rose 29.4 percent from 2019, the year preceding the coronavirus pandemic, the report said.

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Biden to Take Part in APEC Meeting Friday to Discuss Pandemic, Recovery - White House

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will participate in a virtual meeting with the leaders of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries to discuss the coronavirus pandemic and the global recovery efforts, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"On Friday July 16, President Joseph R. Biden Jr. will participate in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders' Virtual Retreat, where Leaders will discuss ending the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting the global economic recovery," Psaki said in a press release.

The meeting will mark Biden's first engagement with many of the APEC leaders, especially those in Southeast Asia, Psaki said.

Biden plans to update APEC leaders on US efforts to provide COVID-19 vaccines to Asia-Pacific countries and he will also discuss economic matters related to the Indo-Pacific region, Psaki added.

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Americans' Confidence in 14 Major Institutions Dips From 2020 - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – An annual poll of Americans confidence in 14 key institutions, including the medical system and public schools, showed that just about a third of US adults had trust in them, the Gallup organization said on Wednesday.

"Currently, an average 33% of U.S. adults express 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in 14 institutions, marking a three-percentage-point dip since 2020 and a return to the level seen in 2018 and 2019," a press release explaining the poll said.

In 2020, confidence in several specific institutions increased as the nation dealt with the coronavirus pandemic. These included some of the business and societal sectors most affected by the public health and financial effects of the pandemic, including the medical system, public schools, small business, organized religion and banks, the release said.

This year, these same five institutions show the greatest decreases in confidence. However, they all are perceived at least slightly better than they were in 2019 before the pandemic. In particular, confidence in the medical system is substantially higher now (44 percent) than it was two years ago (36 percent), the release added.

Gallup has tracked 14 core institutions since 1993, and the public's confidence in them has remained relatively low — particularly over the past 15 years, when the average has not risen above 36 percent, according to the release.

Results are based on telephone interviews conducted June 1-July 5, 2021 with a random sample of 1,381 adults at least 18 years old, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of

Columbia. The total sample is weighted to represent racial and ethnic groups proportionately to their share of the US population. The margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Overnight Rate at 0.25%, Slows Quantitative Easing Program

TORONTO, July 14 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada on Wednesday maintained the target overnight rate at 0.25 percent and will continue to do so until the inflation rate plateaus at a sustainable level.

"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at the effective lower bound of 0.25 percent, with the Bank Rate at 0.5 percent and the deposit rate at 0.25 percent," the Bank of Canada said in a statement.

The central bank added that the overnight rate will remain at its effective lower bound until the country's inflation rate levels off at the bank's target rate of 2 percent.

The inflation rate stood at 3.6 percent in May. Current interest levels are drawing criticism from political circles, however, the bank maintains that this is temporary in the presence of "short-run imbalances" and slack in the economy.

Meanwhile, Canada's central bank adjusted its quantitative easing program, scaling back weekly purchases of government bonds from \$2.4 billion to \$1.60 billion.

The Bank of Canada's next overnight rate announcement is due on September 8.

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Black Americans' Confidence in Police Recovers From 2020 Levels, Remains Low - Gallup Poll

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – African-Americans' confidence in law enforcement, which fell to the lowest level recorded in nearly three decades of polling following the 2020 police killing of George Floyd, recovered somewhat but remains low, a Gallup poll released on Wednesday said.

"Currently, 27% of Black adults in the U.S. say they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in the police, up from 18% in 2020 but similar to the levels seen between 2014 and 2019," a press release explaining the poll said.

White Americans' confidence in police remained unchanged from a year ago at 56 percent but lower than the 60 percent level recorded prior to the May 2020 killing of Floyd, the release said. Gallup's tracking of confidence in police dates back to 1993, and during this time, Black Americans have never had a high level of confidence in law enforcement, the release added.

A series of killings of Black men and women in incidents with White police officers in the past seven years has only further diminished Black Americans' trust in law enforcement, according to the release.

The poll was based on telephone interviews conducted June July 1-5, 2021, with a random sample of 1,381 adults, aged 18 and older, living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia. The margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

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Former US President George Bush Calls Withdrawal From Afghanistan Mistake

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – The former US President George W. Bush, who made a decision to invade Afghanistan in 2001, told Deutsche Welle on Wednesday that he considers the withdrawal of American military forces from the country a mistake as many people, including women and girls, will suffer at the hands of the Taliban (outlawed in Russia).

"You know, I think it is," Bush said when asked if the withdrawal from Afghanistan is a mistake.

"Yeah, because I think the consequences are going to be unbelievably bad. And I am sad. Laura [Bush] and I spent a lot of time with Afghan women. And they're scared. I am afraid Afghan women and girls are going to suffer unspeakable harm."

The former US President also thinks that the Taliban will go after all the interpreters and people who helped the US and NATO troops over the past two decades if they will be left behind.

Afghanistan is seeing a spike in violence from the Taliban as international troops are gradually being withdrawn from the country. The troop pullout was one of the points of agreement the Taliban and the United States reached in Doha in February of last year. The Pentagon said that the US had withdrawn over 95% of the US military personnel and equipment from Afghanistan while US President Joe Biden said later the full military pullout will be finished by August 31.

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US Producer Price Index Up 7.3% in June, Most in 11 Years - Labor Department

WASHINGTON, June 14 (Sputnik) - US producer prices rose by 7.3 percent in the year leading up to June, their most in 11 years, the Labor Department said Wednesday.

"The final demand index moved up 7.3 percent for the 12 months ended in June, the largest advance since 12-month data were first calculated in November 2010," the department said, referring to the so-called PPI, or Producer Price Index, which measures the average changes in prices received by domestic producers for their output.

Economists polled by US media had forecast a 6.7 percent year-on-year increase in June PPI, a benign rise from May's annual rise of 6.6 percent.

"The PPI data continues to show pipeline inflation which always has a potential of making its way into consumer prices," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive.

US inflation will likely remain elevated in the near term before moderating, Federal Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday.

"Inflation has increased notably and will likely remain elevated in coming months before moderating. Inflation is being temporarily boosted by base effects, as the sharp pandemic-related price declines from last spring drop out of the 12-month calculation," Powell said in his prepared semi-annual testimony to Congress monetary policy.

The Fed chief said prices for services that were hard hit by the pandemic have also jumped in recent months as demand for these services has surged with the reopening of the economy.

"In addition, strong demand in sectors where production bottlenecks or other supply constraints have limited production has led to especially rapid price increases for some goods and services, which should partially reverse as the effects of the bottlenecks unwind," Powell said

Commodity-fueled inflation has become a hot-button issue in the United States since vaccine breakthroughs for the COVID-19 in November unleashed price rallies in most raw materials amid forecasts for rapid economic recovery from the pandemic. Constraints in supply chains seeing explosive demand after months of lax activity have added to the upward price pressure in most commodities.

The White House said last week that monopoly by players in key US industries has also led to tripling mark-ups in prices of necessities such as prescription drugs, hearing aids and internet service.

The US economy shrank by 3.5 percent in 2020 due to lockdowns imposed by the COVID-19. Since the start of this year, growth has exceeded expectations, with a first-quarter expansion of 6.4 percent.

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Khalilzad to Meet Ghani in Uzbekistan as Senior US Officials Visit Country - White House

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad will meet Afghan President Ashraf Ghani during a US delegation visit to Uzbekistan, the National Security Council spokeswoman Emily Horne said on Wednesday.

"U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad will join the [US-led] delegation for diplomatic engagements with President Ashraf Ghani of Afghanistan and with leaders from the C-5 and other regional countries to discuss how to promote peace, security, and development in Afghanistan, and advance shared regional security interests, including counterterrorism cooperation," the statement said.

The delegation, which will pay the visit to Uzbekistan this week, will be headed by the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security, Dr. Elizabeth Sherwood-Randall.

"[Sherwood-Randall] will lead a U.S. delegation to a high-level international conference promoting prosperity, security, and regional connectivity between Central and South Asia in Tashkent, Uzbekistan," the statement added.

Sherwood-Randall is expected to meet with leaders from across the region.